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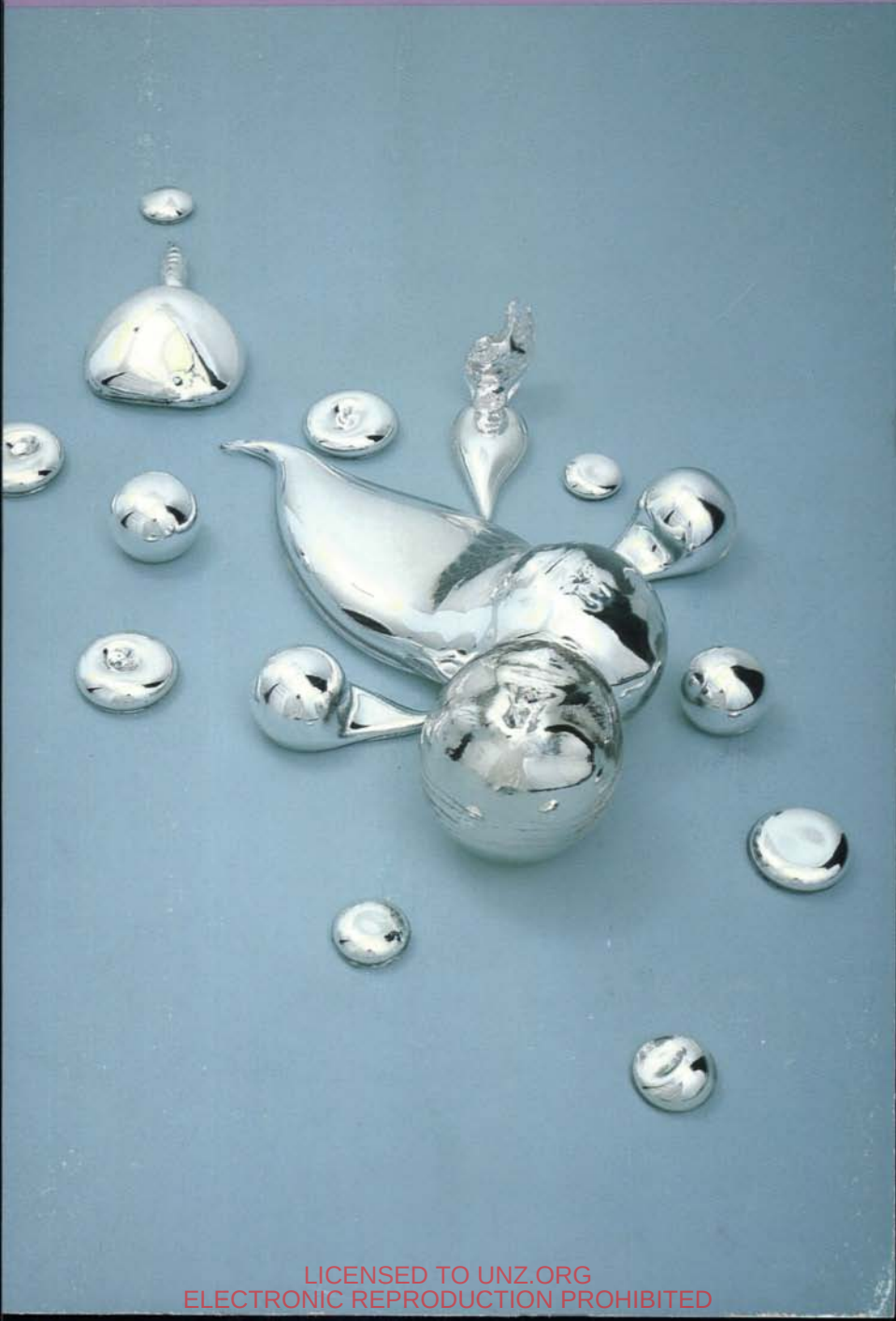

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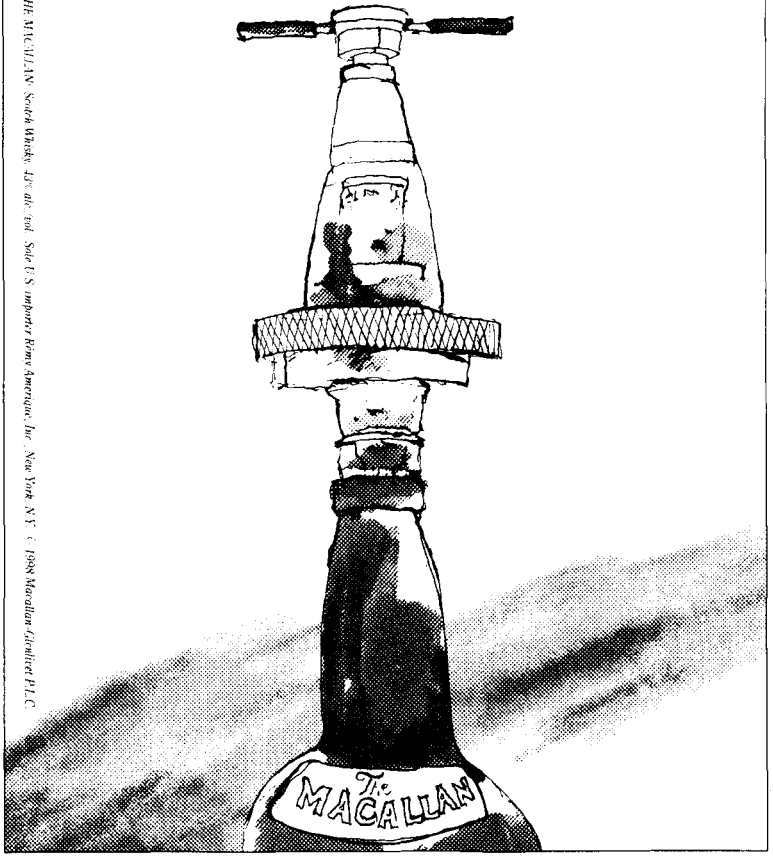

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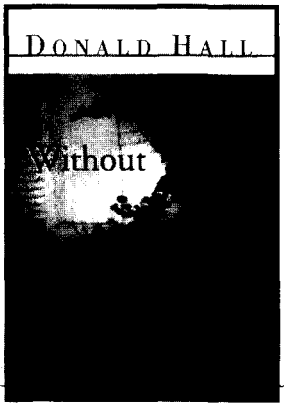

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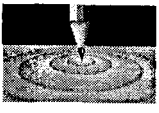

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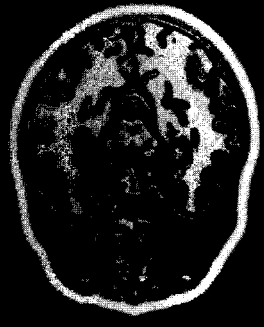

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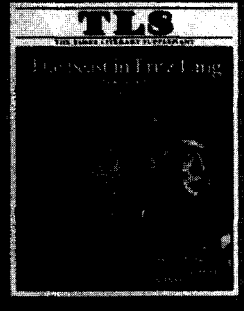

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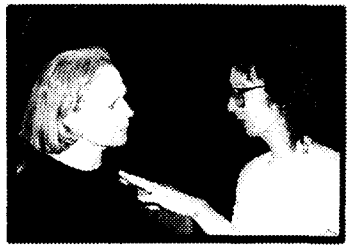

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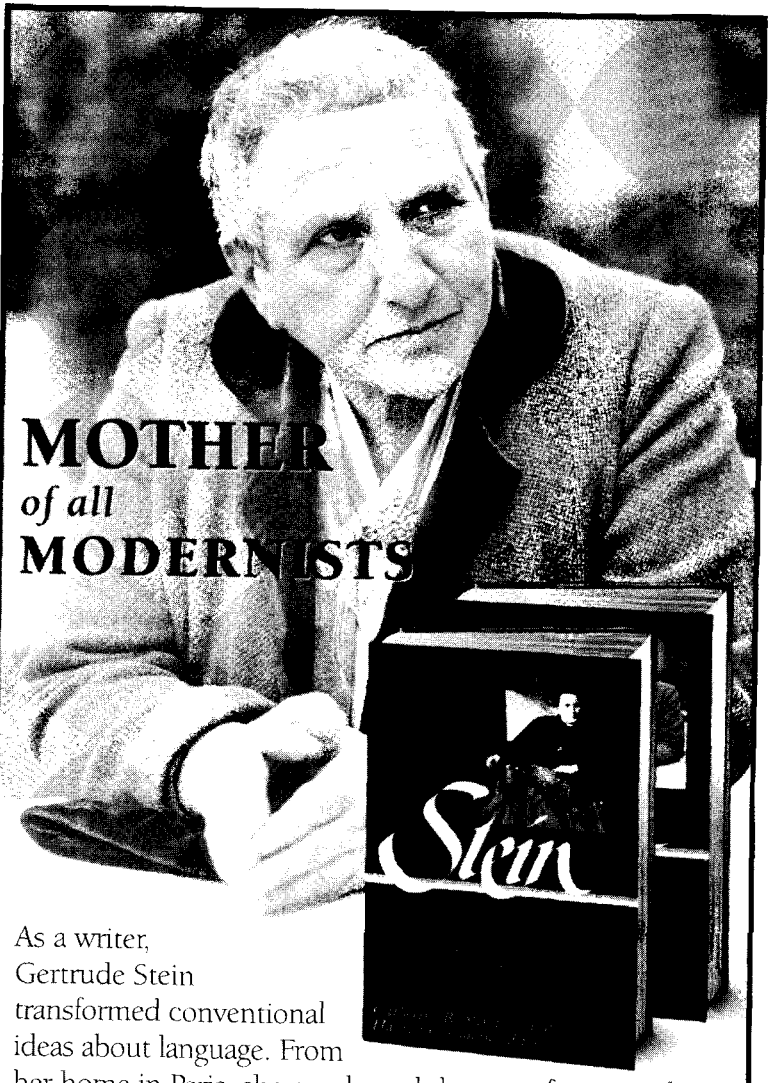

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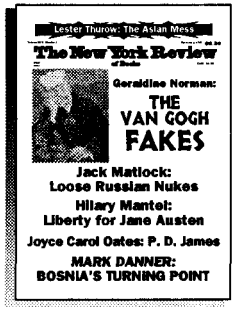
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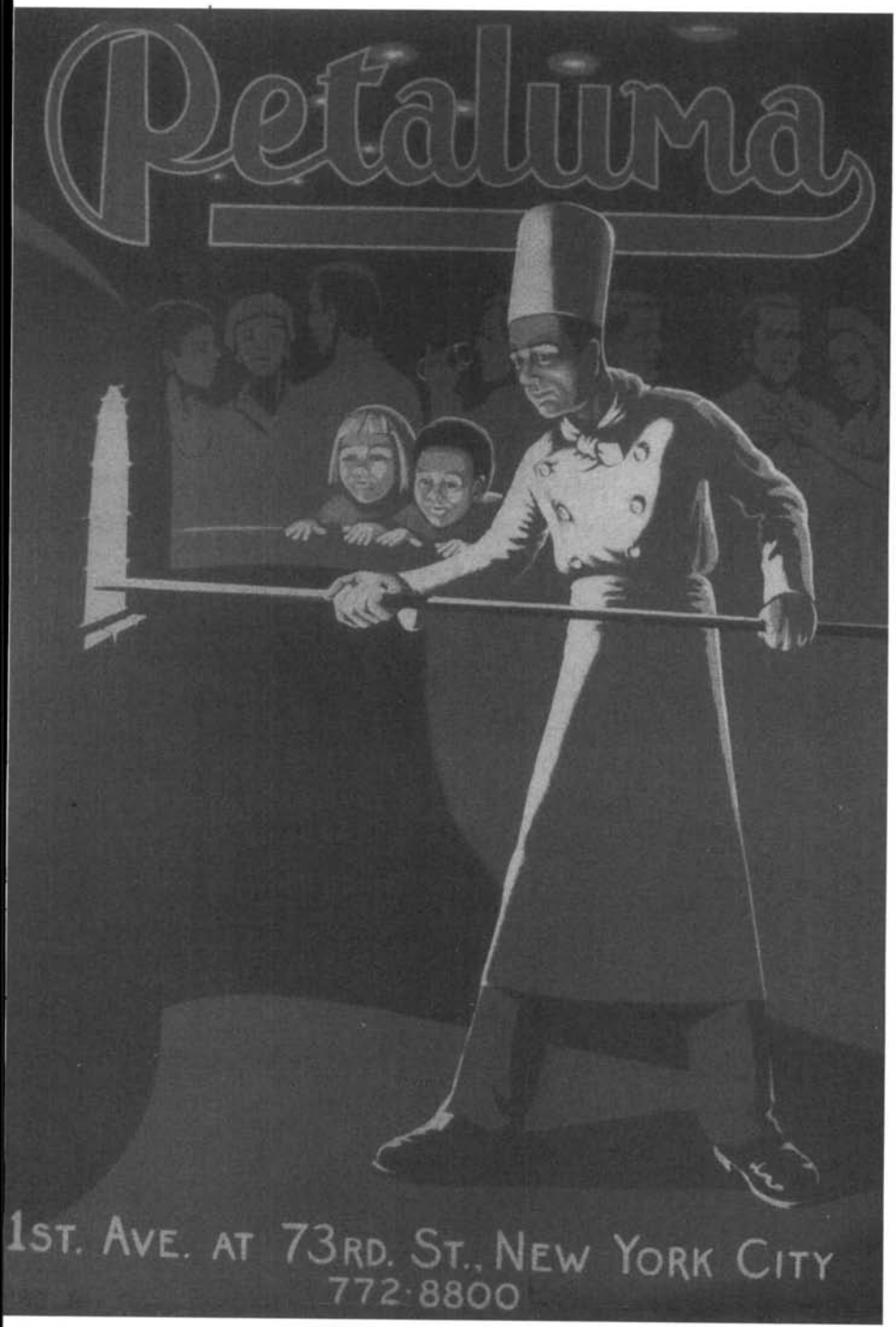

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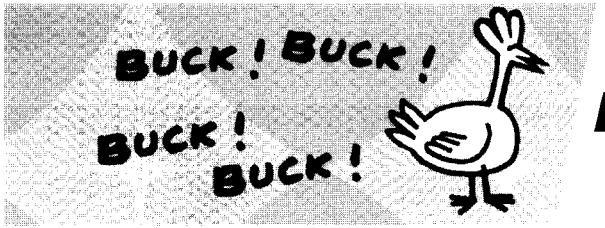

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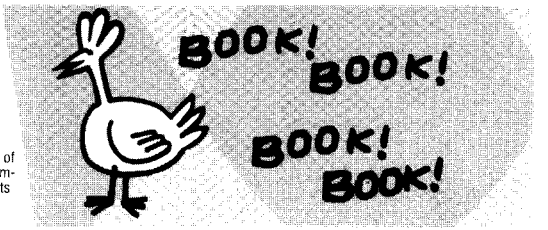

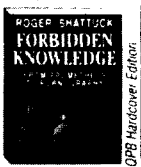

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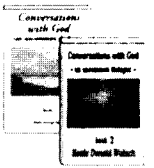

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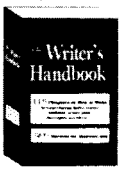

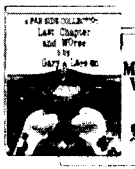

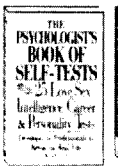

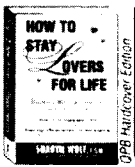

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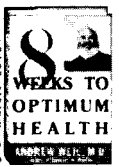

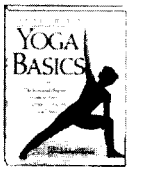

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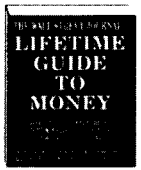

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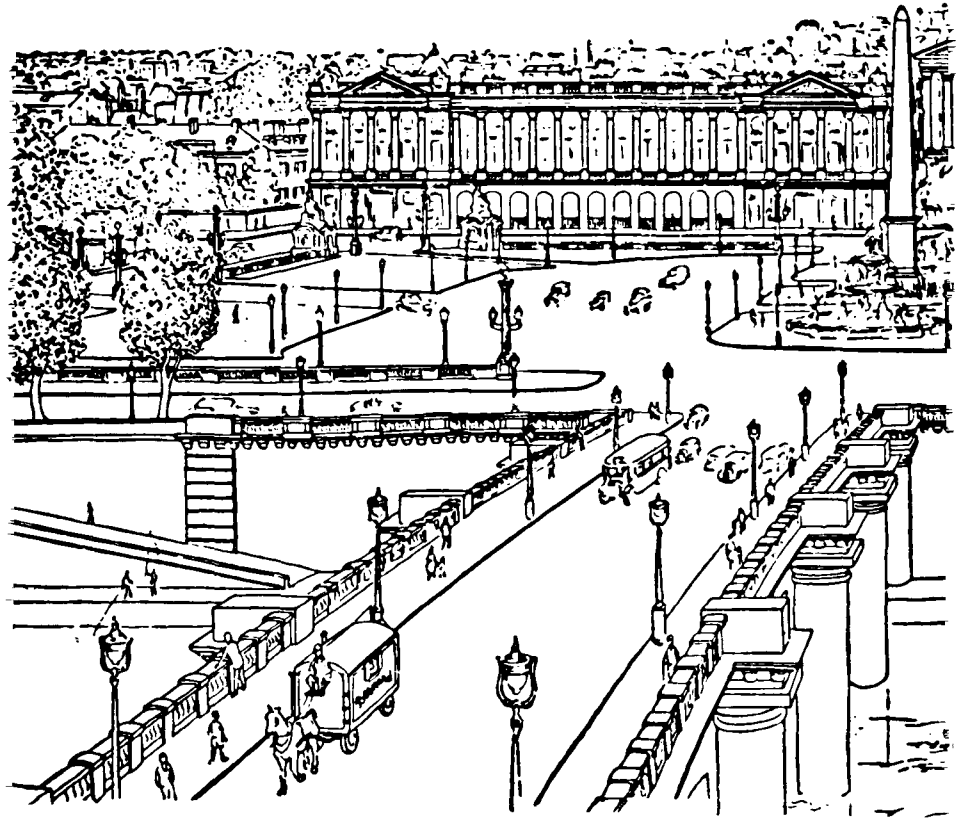

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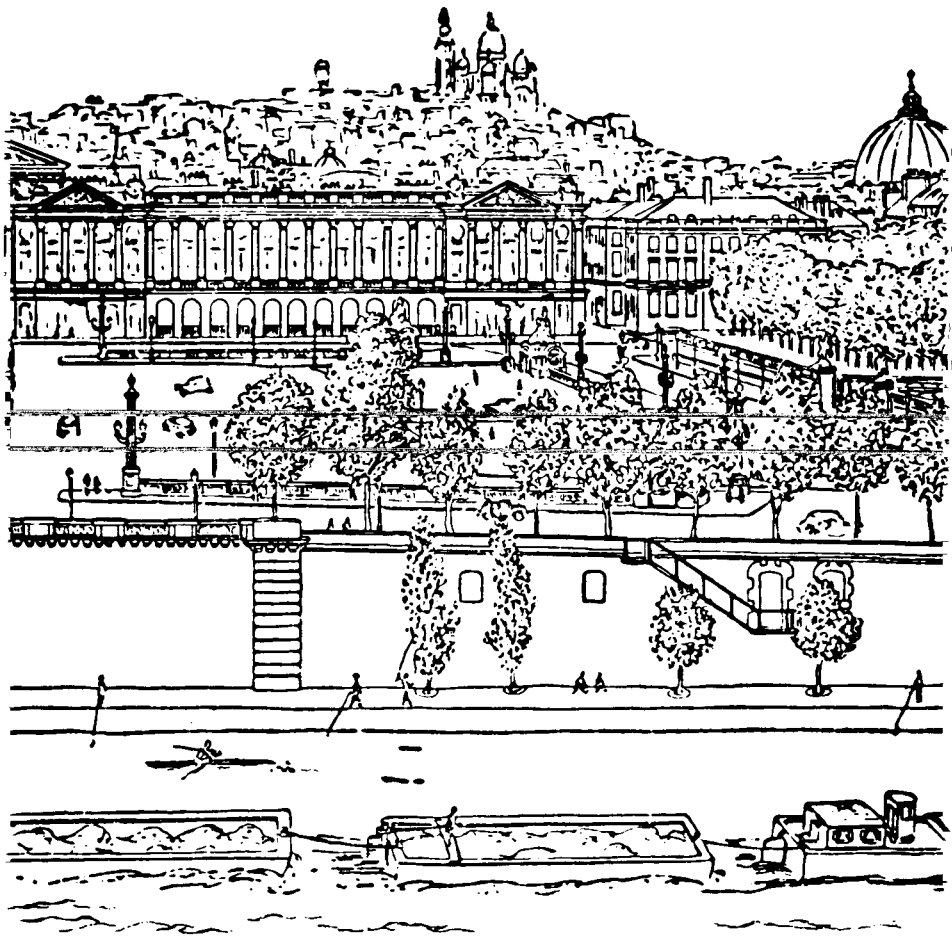

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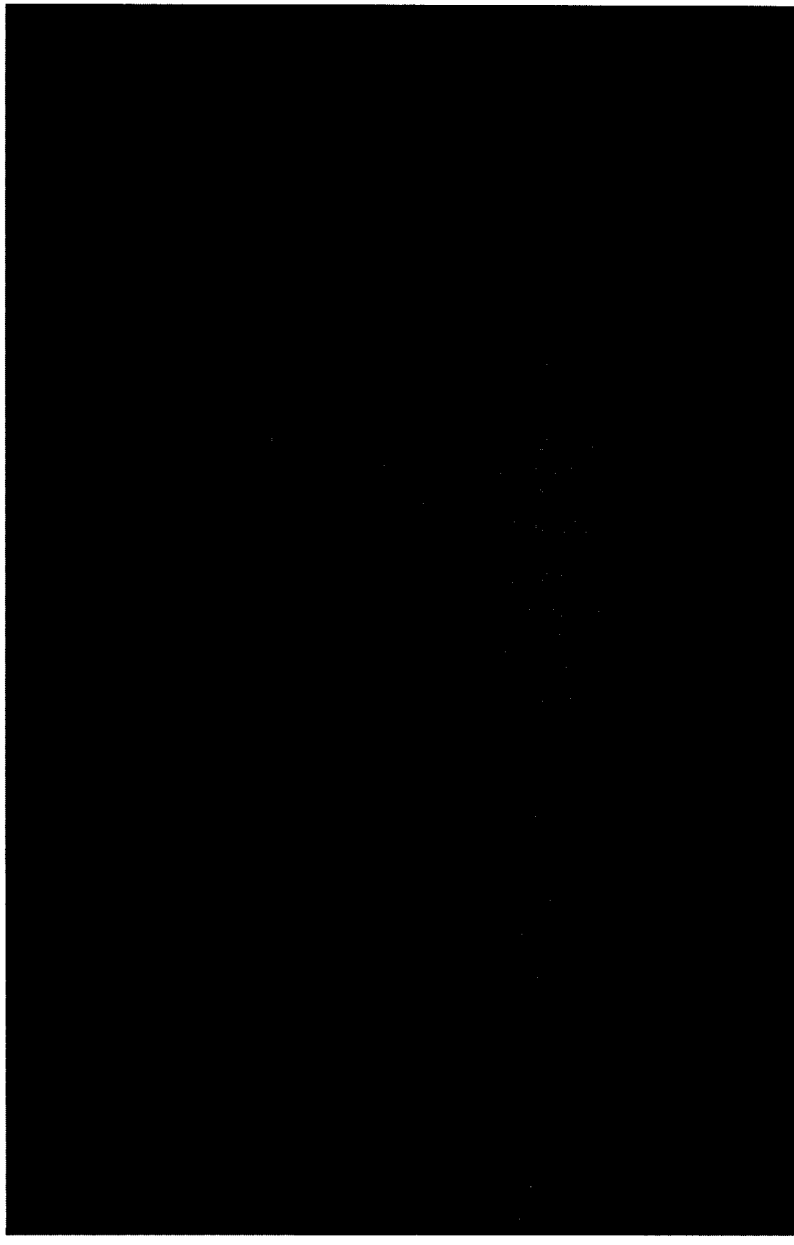

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The editors are saddened by the news of Eugene Walter's death in Mobile, Alabama, earlier this year. An accomplished writer, artist and culinary expert, he was a contributor to the first issue in the spring of 1953 (a short story entitled "Troubadour"). An Advisory Editor in those early years, many of his suggestions (art portfolios, poems, fiction) subsequently found their way into the magazine, including his remarkable Art of Fiction interview with Isak Dinesen in the autumn issue, 1956. A memorable character both in sagacity and looks—he acted in a number of Fellini's films—he signed his letters for reasons known only to himself, Professor James B. Willoughby, though most of us knew him as "Tum-te-Tum"—a phrase he expressed in the editorial office back in 1953 on hearing his short story had been accepted. A rare personage, his loss is hard to accept.

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NOTICE

Subscribers will have noted that in recent years we have devoted a few numbers to a single topic—theme issues, so-called. The Humor issue (Harold Bloom's "Canon of Western Humor" among the contents) appeared in 1995, Screenwriting (interviews with Richard Price, Billy Wilder and John Gregory Dunne) was published in 1996, and in 1997 the Theater number (interviews with Wendy Wasserstein, David Mamet and Sam Shepard along with the entire text of Martin McDonagh's play *The Cripple of Inishmaan*). Indeed, the demand for the Theater issue required a reprint order (the first time such a thing has happened in the magazine's history) and was probably responsible for the Review being nominated this year for a National Magazine Award for General Excellence. Buoyed by such success, we have plans for issues devoted to Biography and yes, Erotica. This issue focusing on British writing—both fiction and poetry—is the first number to highlight a national literature, or perhaps in this case the literatures of a confederation—the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland.

There have been some doubters. The young Scottish writer Alan Warner (author of the eponoymously named cult novel about the Glasgow street existentialist and raver-girl, Morvern Callar) pronounced that he seriously doubted editors could round up enough good material in the whole of Britain to fill such an issue and encouraged us instead to publish the work of Mark Richard (who hails from Virginia and whose work we have indeed accepted in the past) and Lisa Shea (author of the Whiting-Award novel *Hula* and a Brooklyn native), and to consider a theme issue devoted to tributes to the late West Virginia short-story writer Breece D'J Pancake, to which he'd gladly contribute.

Despite Alan Warner's doubts, a substantial British issue has been put together. Additionally, a number of writers and agents seemed eager to forget eight hundred years of hostility and assume that we also wished to include work by writers born and residing in the Republic of Ireland. This was not in our plans. By the time a passport check had been initiated, one writer, Claire Keegan, an Irish native temporarily living in Georgia (the state) slipped through like Br'er Rabbit. We retained her story in the issue as a portent of future peace and in the spirit of the Belfast accords.

—J.L.

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from The Last King of Scotland

Giles Foden

I did almost nothing on my first day as Idi Amin's doctor. I had just come in from one of the western provinces, where I'd worked in a bush surgery. Kampala, the city, seemed like paradise after all that.

Back in my old neighbourhood, I'd seen to Idi once. On his bullying visits to the gum-booted old chiefs out there, he would drive a red Maserati manically down the dirt tracks. Walking in the evenings, under the telegraph poles where the kestrels perched, you could tell where he'd been—the green fringe of grass down the middle of the track would be singed brown by the burning sump of the low-slung car.

On this occasion, he'd hit a cow—some poor smallholder had probably been fattening it up for slaughter—spun the vehicle and been thrown clear, spraining his wrist in the process. The soldiers, following him in their slow, camouflaged jeeps, had come to call for me. I had to go and attend

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to him by the roadside. Groaning in the grass, Idi was convinced the wrist was broken, and he cursed me in Swahili as I bound it up.

But I must have done something right because, a few months later, I received a letter from the Minister of Health, Jonah Wasswa, appointing me to the post of General Amin's personal physician—Medical Doctor to His Excellency—at State House, one of his residences. That was Idi's way, you see. Punish or reward. You couldn't say no. Or I didn't think, back then, that you could. Or I didn't really think about it at all.

I explored the planes and corners of my gleaming office, which stood in the grounds of State House and came with a next-door bungalow thrown in. I felt rather pleased with its black couch and swivel chair, its green filing cabinets, its bookshelves stacked with medical reports and back issues of *The Lancet*, its chrome fittings and spring-loaded Anglepoise lamps. My immediate tools—stethoscope, a little canvas roll of surgical instruments, casebook and so on—were laid out tidily on the desk. The neatness and the general spotlessness of the place were the work of Cecilia, my nurse. She was a remnant from my predecessor, Taylor. After suffering my attentions at the roadside, Amin had summarily dismissed him. I knew I ought to feel guilty about this, but I didn't, not really. Cecilia made it quite plain that she didn't like or approve of me—I reckon that she must have been half in love with old Taylor—and that she soon would be going back herself, back to Ashford, Kent.

Let her go, I thought, pushing aside a paper on disorders of the inner ear: my private study, my little problem. I was just glad to be out of the bush and to be earning a bit more money. The sun was shining and I was happy, happier than I'd been for a good many months. I stared out of the window at a cultivated lawn, which swept down a hill towards the lake, glittering in the distance. A breeze moved the leaves of the shrubbery: bougainvillaea, flame tree, poinsettia. Through the slatted blinds I could see a group of prisoners

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in white flannel uniforms mowing the grass with sickles. They were guarded by a sleepy soldier, leaning on his gun in the dusty haze. Swish, swish, the noise came quietly through to me. I watched the prisoner nearest, slightly hypnotized by the movement of his cutter and the articulation of his bony arm. I shouldn't think they were fed too well: a bit of steamed green banana or maize meal, some boiled-up neck of chicken if they were lucky.

Turning away from the window, I resolved, since there didn't seem any likelihood of a presidential consultation that afternoon, to get a bus into town. I used to wear just shorts and shirt in the bush and needed to get a linen suit run up. The street-side tailors—there were whole rows of them—with their push-pedal, cast-iron Singers, their bad teeth and worse English, were just the fellows for the job. They could sort you out a suit in a couple of hours, while you looked round the market or went to one of the astoundingly understocked grocers. Not quite Savile Row, but good enough for here, good enough for Idi, anyway. Though he himself did wear Savile Row tailoring, with its luscious, thick lapels and heavy hem-drop. Zipped up in their polypropylene bags, the suits came in on the weekly flight from Stansted, hung on racks among crates of Scotch, golf clubs, radio cassettes, cartons of cigarettes, bicycles tubed in cardboard, Slim Line kettles, sleek toasted-sandwich makers with winking lights. And plain things, too: sugar and tea—products that might well have come from here in the first place, swapping their gunnysacks for cellophane packaging on the return trip.

•

I didn't see Amin for some time. Whenever I approached Wasswa, the Minister, about being presented to him, I was fobbed off. As his physician, I thought that I should (at the very least) make a preliminary examination. It would only be right and proper. Otherwise, what was the point of me? But Amin was too busy, apparently. Not doing anything

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important, if the manner in which I was finally to see him was anything to go by.

A month after I arrived, I went up to the pool at one of the city's big hotels. As a nonresident, you could use it by paying a daily fee. I changed in the little concrete room. One side of it was full of chugging machinery—for cleaning or pumping out the pool, I supposed—with dials and a couple of green-handled levers sticking out of it. On the other was a little wooden door, padlocked and marked PRIVATE in red letters.

I put my stuff in a locker and went out. There were lots of people out there, mostly whites, lying on sun-loungers like Romans at a feast, sipping their Cokes and Fantas and reading paperback books as the waiters moved stealthily among them.

I dropped my towel by the side and dived right in. I did some lengths, enjoying the feeling of it after so much time in the heat, and then hauled myself out next to where I'd left my towel.

When I got out, as I was drying myself, I noticed several Ugandans, including a couple of soldiers, come into the pool area while I was swimming, and now they were sitting on the loungers, some fully dressed, some in trunks. One soldier was on mine but I didn't have the courage to challenge him.

On another lounger, over the other side, sat Wasswa. He beckoned to me, shouting across the water.

"Come and sit next to me, Doctor Garrigan. I have something to show you."

I went over and sat down on the cushioned plastic next to him.

"What is it?"

"You will see. It is very special."

He was wearing a pair of very skimpy trunks, I noticed—and then there was a kind of roaring sound from the centre of the pool. A column of water, five or six feet high, rose up like a fountain. I spotted something dark underneath it. The roaring gave way to a mechanical grinding, and the Ugandans began to clap and cheer. A head came out as the plume

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cascaded down—oversized, like a bust of some great hero of the past—then broad shoulders, a stout belly in shorts, thighs, two doughty knees (one scarred) and finally a pair of surprisingly delicate ankles.

Amin waved at the jubilant bunch of flunkies and soldiers and dived off the platform. I could see the black X of him swimming underwater towards where Wasswa and I were sitting.

"It is a special machine His Excellency had put in," Wasswa said, pointing at the pillar in the centre of the pool. "It brings him up from underneath."

And then Amin's smiling face was breaking the surface in front of us, his eyes red and blinking. He pulled himself up, water falling off him onto the kerb-like edge. As if he had forgotten himself, Wasswa hurriedly got up and draped a towel around the President's shoulders. I stood up too.

Amin, at his full height, looked down at me closely. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"So . . . my personal physician. Why are you wasting your time around the swimming pool? You should be out healing the people of Uganda!"

"Uh-m," I said, bewildered, "I have been very busy, Your Excellency. I have been catching up on research. Anyway, in case you drowned . . . "

He stared like a bullfrog for a second, and then burst out laughing, pounding me on the back with his wet hand.

"Ah, Doctor Nicholas, you are a funny man. I was only joking. How is it going with you in Uganda? Do you like your new job?"

"Yes, but I really need to get the chance to check you over."

"Of course, of course. If I am sick. Now I am healthy."

He patted his stomach. "Very, very healthy. Come, enjoy yourself at our pool."

He turned away but paused then, and spun back around. Involuntarily, I took a step back.

"No!" he said. "I want show you my secret weapon. Follow me."

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He led me over towards the changing room, the retinue following too, whispering like naughty schoolchildren behind us. We went inside the room and passed to the bank of machinery. On the door marked PRIVATE, the padlock was hanging off its clasp. Amin pulled one of the levers and a noise came from inside. The pillar coming down, I guessed, from the wet suck of hydraulic air.

"This is very significant advance, this very important in our technology in Uganda," said Amin. "The Israeli people made it for me."

He turned to me, jabbing the air with his finger.

"Good engineers, bad politicians in Tel Aviv. Now, you look inside." He opened the door.

I did as he said. There was a dark little cubicle there, with a metal floor and walls, all dripping with water.

Suddenly I felt a hand in the small of my back pushing me in, and a deep laugh as the door closed behind. Complete darkness. The mechanical noise again. And then a wall of water coming down on me. The force of it almost knocked me over. The roof had opened and I thought I was going to drown—except that, at the same time, the floor of the cubicle was rising and there were powerful jets of air coming up all around. I could see light above me through the falling water.

I emerged spluttering, crouched on the platform as it rose above the surface of the pool. The Ugandans, who had presumably rushed back outside, and the few Europeans who hadn't slunk off when Amin appeared, were gathered there—cheering *me* now.

Trying to not look cross, I slid into the water. Amin himself pulled me out at the edge. He hurt my arm, and he was laughing like a drain.

"Oh doctor, doctor. I am sorry. But it is good that you learn to swim in a proper manner. I myself have been swimming in more rough water. You should be better. One day you may be in a war situation, doctoring for the Uganda Army."

He gave me his towel, which was large, and decorated with the crested-crane symbol.

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"You frightened me," I said, drying myself slightly queasily.

"Do not be frightened. It is foolish to be frightened. Come, sit down. Eh, you!"

He beckoned at one of his retinue. "Order sandwiches. And fried chicken. And Coca-Cola also."

The man rushed off: his immediate, mute response was something I'd get used to seeing around Amin. I sat down on one of the loungers, rather shaken.

"No, doctor, you must not be frightened. To be afraid is a coward, and I do not think my own doctor can be a coward. Not possible. All of you, listen to me!"

Amin dived into the pool. With powerful strokes, he swam across to the pillar, which was still elevated from my own adventure. He clambered on to the platform and clapped his hands.

"All of you people. Listen to me. I want to talk to about afraidness and cowardice in Uganda."

He smoothed the front of his wet trunks. "The truth is, afraidness is bad. I was not afraid to take the presidency from Obote or to send the Kabaka to England. It was the best thing for my country. I think God will not punish me for it."

There were murmurs of assent from the retinue. Beside me, Wasswa was nodding his head eagerly.

"It is true, I like to be head man. I do not like to be told 'Amin, carry this gun,' or 'Amin, dig latrine here.'" He pretended to dig on the platform, and then continued: "I like this not at all, it is not right for my people for the white man to come and tell him this thing, that thing. But I do like it after, when the officer in the army before say, 'Well done Amin.' Just like when the Queen of England go and tell Scottish people, make planting here, build wall there. To keep antelope. The Scots eat antelope daily. Look how strong they are."

He pointed at me. Everyone looked, nodding at me, smiling at me.

"And myself, you know. You know in my heart, as I have

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said before, I am the king. That is why I like these machines. Machines are the things for kings."

He stamped on the metal, the funereal sound ringing out across the pool. I thought of my father and his bells, and then of that old Jacobite toast: "To the king over the water . . . "

"For it is true, also, out of my nature, I love to rule! No claim is first but mine. But the peoples of Uganda are good and therefore they deserve to have a good leader like me. If they were bad, they would deserve a bad leader. It is an obvious thing. It is logical. God would send this bad man to plague them. It would be horrible for them indeed."

Amin paused then and coughed, as if the water had got into his lungs.

"This man, yes, he would chase people and not be good, and he would take women from, ah, all over the place—black women and white women also. He could not make friends with any man who was a good man and he could not see a woman he did not want to make pregnant. He would say, this thing happen and then . . . this thing happen! Just because of his cleverness. And so he would slip here and run down there, thinking he is being very clever following his own plan. Eh, you, bring me some foods!"

A waiter from the hotel had brought the ordered refreshments out on trays. He looked around nervously when Amin addressed him.

"Go, go," said Wasswa urgently. "Take it inside."

The waiter looked aghast.

"Take the tray into the pool."

The waiter walked round to the steps and gingerly went down into the water. Holding the tray above him, he walked as far as he could up the shallow end, the water steadily soaking his white coat—until, forced to swim, he struggled to reach the platform. At one point the bottles of Coke and the plates nearly slid off the tray, and there was a palpable gasp around the pool. Eventually he got there. Amin squatted down and took the tray off him.

"Well, I am very glad you are not a diver in my navy,

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Mr Waiter. You should get some training in swimming and sub-aqua."

He laughed at himself, and the whole gathering laughed, as the waiter swum back sheepishly in his heavy clothes. His white coat had ballooned up.

"Anyway," said Amin, with his mouth full of chicken. "This bad chief, my friends. He thinks, what he is doing, that it is his plan not the plan of God. But it is in fact God's will what he is doing all the time. So he appears a very great man because of this. He believes in taking every chance and there is nothing he does not dare do. He never says—*simama*, finish, he is even like a brave man going on until the last minute when he is taken down. Then, too, he cannot realize his true situation. He just will not see it."

He waved the chicken leg in the air. You could see the joint move as he gesticulated. The loose, greasy skin was red from *piri-piri*. He took another bite, then dropped it on the platform by his side.

"So, things would be bad in that country until then. Every morning, when the sun shine, there is a new widow crying in her hut and a baby there chewing on her breast like a dry maize cob. And every day this bad chief is spitting at God in the sky. He puts a finger up at the moon, he does not know when is an equal measure of mealies flour in any thing. For he always goes too much in every area . . .

"Yes, for with his evil ways, he is like Shaitan and his country the whole of it will be his tomb. For him and many people otherwise. Even he, the top man, he asks himself, 'is this Uganda?, or is Uganda hell?' For no kind of life is as wretched as this fellow's—he is afraid from leopard dreams, false spirits, which do come to him in the night—and when he dies he will die a cruel and an extraordinary death."

He swigged from a bottle of Coke, and then held his hand against his chest.

"For this is the truths. He goes steps up and it is too much good: his belly is fat and he empties his loins often. But there is a rope around his neck and when he reaches the highest

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step, God—he pulls this fellow into the fire by the end of the rope! Because he has now done his work for him already, the will of God goes straight towards taking him, and when he does take him it is one for one, special parcel both ways."

With that he put down the bottle, clipped his palms together and dived into the pool smartly. We were still applauding when he came up.

"Well," said Amin, as one of the retinue dried his back with the crested-crane towel, "that is my story for you today, my friends. And now, now we will have a swimming competition—so we are fit on Lake Victoria in case of invasion."

And so they did, though I noticed that in all the races in which Amin took part the other participants allowed him to win. I crept off after watching it for a while. I felt, in one way and another, that I had done my bit. That no more would be expected of me for the time being.

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Andrew Motion

Out of the Blue

What was I thinking of (not Tintern
Abbey, that's for sure, more likely you—
I mean: we were on honeymoon)
when, like a bolt from the blue,

trembling with afternoon heat-fatigue,
there Tintern just was. With all the time
in the world we stopped, and looking it over
thought we had all the earlier time

in the world as well: the deadpan chants
still rising like burned-off dew through the roof;
the hands, the knees, the feet which wore down
stone with the softness of lips, but prove

what wants to survive; the cloisters' sinewy
darkness—a labyrinth-lair of the brain,
a damp-smelling muddle, a slow walk round
in the skull then back to the light again.

That's right: what was I thinking of?
Anyway, after we'd killed an hour or so
whatever it was had changed, and on we went
in our juddering Mini, grinding up through

the maze of whiskery lanes and seeing
(supposing we looked) the abbey behind us more
and more like the bones of a fossilised fish
unearthed on the valley floor—

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marvellous, yet, however we screwed up our eyes,
not part of the world we knew. The hedges
closed in, throwing their whitethorn confetti.
An oak the wind had carved to an anvil-wedge

threatened our roof. Our quivering gear-stick
groped its way into first. And all the while
our sense of rising up from the bed
of a sinister lake which could not fail

to drown us, if we stayed put,
changed to a sense of breathing in light:
the sky swelling, clouds cutting loose, the wind
insisting on length and breadth and height.

Which is partly why what happened next
felt odd (I don't just mean wrong). We'd come
to the head of the alley, Tintern still sort of
in view behind us, but now like crumbs

of bread, not bones, and stopped
at the T of our lane and the larger road
which would run us due west. No sound.
Only a blackbird quizzing a leaf. The creaking load

of our engine in gear and waiting. So forward
we crept, all eyes, when out of the blue (once
again) came a van. Or fell, rather. Fell like a hawk
falls on a mouse. A green delivery van, askew

on two wheels yet intent, heading for us
and then choosing: no. Re-aiming its dive,
leaving us smeared with the rush of its wings
but breathing, still there and alive,

and watching how nearly it toppled, smashing
the far bank of the lane, kept balance just,
blasted a few dozen yards, churning up
grass, stones, leaves, branches, earth, dust,

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watching and wanting it over now, *over*, then
finding it was, which was worse: the engine dead,
no voice, the bright drip-drop of petrol,
and with it the chit-chat that blackbird had,

meaning nothing to us, the sky still pouring
into itself, oblivious. Well, I crept out
at last and went looking, squeezed in between
the van and the prickling hedge, thinking: was I about

to see death? We were young, remember, and this
would have been my first time. Though as things
turned out it was not. It was an old man shrunk
to less than himself, chin on the wheel, murmuring

something I could not hear—and to tell you the truth
I was never a part of his real world then, I was
merely a ghost who kept on appearing,
my face where there should have been emptiness,

pressed on that scrap of the sky for ever.
And that's where the story ended. Along
came someone else soon, splitting the day
(which had been intact) into right and wrong,

praise and blame, youth and age. By then I had
looked round and seen how the future would be:
the old man gradually getting his breath,
wiping a thick saliva-blob from his chin; me

with the warmth of his van on my hands
running back down the lane to find you
inside our car. You were wearing that shirt
(grey silk) you had bought for our going-away, and you

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yourself seemed silky, your colourless face
rippling as sunlight swam on the windscreen,
which made you look empty and rapt at once—
half-frightened, half-brave, as you never had been

before, but would be again, with wind still
scratching the hedges around us, and land
falling back to the valley—its river and fiddly ruin
so small I could block them out if I lifted my hand.

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Two Poems by Neil Rollinson

My Wives

I descend on Holborn's escalator
watching my wives pass by on the opposite side,
smiling, waving at me; they shout in Swedish,
Russian, Urdu, that they'll always love me.
Even my English wives croon in their dialects.
My Japanese wives bow low, their kimonos
showering the stairs with the scents of Hokkaido
and Kanto. My wives are everywhere;
pacing the corridors, rushing to Kilburn,
Gatwick, Paddington, staring at me as they go.
They have new husbands now, waiting at home,
but I know they miss me. As we tunnel the grim
postcodes of Lambeth, Borough,
the Elephant and Castle, most of my wives have left
to catch connections for Kent or Sussex.
There are just the two of us now,
husband and wife for a couple of stops.
We sit in our seats, rocking in unison.
She fondles her wedding ring, then starts
to weep. What can I do but join her?
We sob through Waterloo and Kennington,
all the way to Stockwell where she picks up
her bag, and slips through the doors.
I can picture her room in the Walworth Road,
her Joss sticks smouldering, that smell
of patchouli she's left in the empty carriage.
I go home alone, lie in an empty bed
while all my wives are sleeping with men
who do not love them.

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Big in Japan

As I pass the gates of Buckingham Palace
I'm exposed in a hundred Japanese cameras,
like a fossil, flash-frozen in Kodachrome.
I'm big in Japan, they've seen my face
blossom in a thousand Tokyo photo labs.
In Wakayama somebody opens an album
to reminisce, and there I am, under the lamppost,
part of the family portrait. A girl in Kagoshima
opens her purse by the sea and looks
at a photograph. It's a picture of me.
She can't remember my name, or how
she came to know me, but I'm smiling at her,
and what does it mean, when an Englishman
smiles? Behind my head she can see the traffic
in Parliament Square, the Abbey, the black hands
of Big Ben captured at twenty past five.

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Two Poems by Robin Robertson

Dead Sheep in Co. Derry

In a scatter of wool and its own litter
the skull stares out at the road below: socket rings
cool as trigger-guards. The furled-paper sinuses
fragile under the muzzle's tuning fork;
the four plates of the face with their scribbled fissures:
the crazed cruciform of the frontier marks
keeping white from white, nothing from nothing.
She hefts it, turns the bone on its own orbit.
Returning its gaze, she fingers the unmanned interior,
the smooth sides. Lobs it into a ditch.

The Break

Washing glasses in the sink
and the first thing she knew was this
dull click, like a tongue,
under the soap suds.
The foam pinked.
Now she could see blood
smoking from the flap of skin,
and it was over, clearly,
out in the open:
holding water, feeling nothing.

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Crocodile Tears

A.S. Byatt

Patches of time can be recalled under hypnosis. Not only suppressed terrors but those flickering frames of the continuum that, even at the time, seem certain to be forgotten, pleasantly doomed to nonentity. So they have sunk into our brains after all, are part of us. *Patches of time* is a mild metaphor, mixing time and space, mildly appropriate in art galleries, where time is difficult to deal with. How do you decide when to stop looking at something? It is not like a book, page after page, page after page, end. You give it your attention, or you don't. The Nimmos spent their Sundays in those art galleries that had the common sense to open on that dead day. Not the great State galleries, but little ones, where some bright object or image might be collected. They liked buying things, they liked simply looking, they were happily married and harmonious in their stares, on the whole. They engaged a patch of paint and abandoned it, usually simultaneously, they lingered in the same places, considering the same things. Some they remembered, some they forgot, some they carried away to keep.

That Sunday, they were in the Narrow House Gallery, which specialised in minor English art, drawings, prints, flowers, birds, angels, handscreen landscapes and pop-art posters. It was higgledy-piggledy, with real plums in the duff, Tony Nimmo used to say. The Gallery was in Bloomsbury, in what had been an eighteenth-century private house; it went up and up, with small rooms opening off a turning stair, which was also hung with stags and sunsets, garden gates, watering cans and silver lakes with swans on. They always had a good pub lunch on these Sundays. This one was

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a sunny Sunday in early May, a really sunny Sunday that narrowed the eyes in the light, that warmed the skin, even through glass. Patricia ate prawn salad; she was watching her figure. Tony ate a robust beef and ham platter with pickles, and onions. Then he had brandy syllabub. And two pints of Special. He was a large man, with a bald crown above fine dark hair. His face was peacefully reddened, a pale poppy flush. They were in their middle fifties. Patricia wore a butter-yellow suit, nipped in at the waist, and a bronze silk scarf. Her hair was bronze too, fanning up and out. She had good big breasts and a generous bottom, solid and lively. On the top floor of the Narrow House, they had one of their rare disagreements.

The disagreement was about a work called *The Windbreak*. It was small; about two feet long and one foot deep, framed in a deep, polished dark wooden frame with brass nails. It was part collage, part oil painting. It was a seaside scene, an English seaside scene, with a blue grey sea, flecked with dirty white, stretching to meet a pewter sky with livid oily blue patches. These took up the top two-thirds of the work. The beach had real sand scattered on a fawn surface, and tiny real shells and bits of seaside plastic reconstituted into tiny windmills and buckets and spades, sugar pink, turquoise blue, poster red. Much of the left part of the beach was taken up with the windbreak. This was made up of painted cloth, in rainbow stripes, stretched on wooden pegs, representing stakes. There was also a coloured ball, Day-Glo orange with green stars on. Patricia's indifferent glance slid over this object; she had seen, in other patches of time, hundreds more or less like it; she moved on to contemplate a delicate six-inch square dandelion clock on a cobalt-blue ground. Tony, however, was taken with the windbreak. He went up to it, and peered into its glass box. He stood back and stared. He smiled. Patricia, when he called her, turned back from the dandelion and saw him smiling.

"I like this," said Tony. "I really like this. It isn't much."

"You can't like that, darling. It's banal."

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"No, it's not. I can see how you might think it was. But it's not. It's just simple and it reminds you of things, of whole—of whole—oh, of all those long days of doing nothing on beaches, you know, the mixture of misery and being out in the air and sort of free—of being a child."

"Banal, as I said."

"*Look* at it, Pat. It's a perfectly good complete image of something important. And the colours are good—all the natural things dismal, all the man-made things shining—"

"Banal, banal." Patricia did not know why she was so irritable. It had been a good lunch. She could even, secretly, see what the memory-box would look like to her if she had liked it, as opposed to disliking it. Tony and the unknown artist shared an emotion, shared a response to the conventional images that evoked that emotion. She didn't, or if she did, it provoked opposition.

"I like it," said Tony. "I'll buy it, it can go in my study, in that space by the window."

"It's a complete waste of money. You'll go off it in no time. I don't want a thing like that in the house. Look at the dreadful predictability of those colours."

"Don't be so snooty. It's *about* the dreadful predictability of those colours. About sad English attempts to cheer up sad English landscapes."

"They don't have to be sad. Not the English, not the colours, not the landscapes. It's a dreadful cliché."

"Clichés are moving."

"I don't want it."

"I do."

"I can't stop you," said Patricia, walking away, past a green maze, past a departing galleon, past a hunt in full cry. She was upset; the good Sunday was threatened by Tony's bad taste. She turned round to tell him that it didn't really matter, that of course he should buy the windbreak if he wanted it, and found that she was alone in the upper room. She could hear his heavy tread winding down the stairwell. She would make it up later. Leave a space, make it up later. She turned

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back to the walls—a blown sheep on moorland, a huge black bull, staring furiously out of the canvas, a fragile bunch of teasels. Later all this would come back, without hypnosis.

It was perhaps half an hour before she went downstairs. She was wearing high-heeled sandals, so she went very carefully round the turns of the stairs, holding on to the bannister. There was a noise downstairs, of doors, of voices; she could hear no words, but she could hear agitation. There were thuds, there was hurry. Outside, there was a siren. Cautiously, she turned the last corner. She saw the backs of a tight group of people bending over something at the bottom of the stair. A man in a green sweater, who had been kneeling, stood up. He was holding a stethoscope. "Dead," he said, "I'm afraid. Instantly. A massive infarct, I suppose. No hope, I'm afraid." Outside, a stretcher was being carried in from an ambulance. The group split and stood back, and Patricia saw Tony lying on his back, on the carpet, under a large painting of an avalanche. His red face was ivory. The doctor had closed his eyes, but he did not look peaceful. His jacket and shirt were opened; the grey hairs on his chest were springy. His belly was a proud mound. His shoes were splayed. Patricia stood by the bannister. The ambulance men came in with the stretcher. As the group gathered again, Patricia walked quickly behind them and out of the open door, into the street. She walked away, quick, quick, with her head up. She stood beside the flowing traffic on New Oxford Street. A taxi came past with a gold light in a black frame. She waved, it stopped, she got in. She gave her home address, which was in Wimbledon. The driver said something, which she did not hear. She sat, clenching both fists on her handbag. It was quick.

Inside her own house she walked from room to room in the May light, and then went upstairs and packed a small suitcase. She was an efficient woman, and she packed for a business trip—a nightdress, chequebooks, the usual pharmacopoeia, uncrushable trousers and tunics, slippers. Washing

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things, makeup, laptop, portable phone. Universal adaptor. Passport. Then she looked round her bedroom, their bedroom, and left it. She called a taxi, and looked round the drawing room. A few photographs smiled at her: Tony in tennis things on the bookshelf, the children twenty years ago. She turned these face down. The phone began to ring. She did not answer, and after a time it stopped. Then it began again. The taxi came. She went out, leaving it ringing. In the taxi, she realised that she should have changed out of her sandals, and nearly burst into tears. She told the taxi driver to go to Waterloo. At Waterloo she walked from the main station to the Eurostar terminal, covering her tracks perhaps, and bought a ticket to Paris. It was smooth, it was easy, there was a train in half an hour. She flowed with the crowd onto the platform, carrying her little bag, and at the top of the escalator, catching sight of her dim reflection in the train window, she nearly began to weep again because of the memorable brightness of her yellow suit.

She found some dark glasses in a pocket of her case, and leaned back in her seat, staring out at fields and hedges. She refused food, refused newspapers. She slept. She woke in the dark tunnel, in a swaying space, and for a moment did not know who or where she was, only that something had happened. Then she began to worry about money. How to have money without being traced? She had money, she was the founder and managing director of a chain of shops, *Anadyomene*, that specialised in bathrooms. The question was, how to have money where she was going, without being traced. She had thought about this before. Vanishing without trace was an idea that had teased her through all the happy years of her married life, her working life. The idea that it was possible to vanish, that there was nothing ineluctably necessary about her work, or her home, was a condition of her pleasure in those things.

She did not think, at this point, about who might trace her. She had a daughter, Megan, and a son, Benjamin, Ben, Benjie, both grown up and married, but they were not the pursuers she figured to herself.

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She did not know where she was going.

They brought champagne in little tublike tumblers, and this she accepted. She felt a light-headed bubbly pleasure in the fact that she did not know where she was going. It could be anywhere at all, anywhere at all. How many people was that ever true for? The train came out of the tunnel.

She had booked to Paris, but she got out at Lille. She bought a ticket to Nice and climbed into a TGV, going south. It was now evening: Lille station was darkening. She remembered early versions of the imagined escape. The young bride's version, standing solitary on the heaving deck of the cross-channel steamer, a vision complete with wake, spray, crying gulls and the moving troughs on the surface of the salt deeps under which she had just shot, sitting in her dark glasses at her brightly lit window. The successful woman's version, the rising nose of the aircraft breaking through the white froth of cloud into clear blue and sunlight, the space of creamy-curded water vapor, the silver purr. Anywhere, at the end of it. Anywhere, nowhere, somewhere. The train was without shock. But quick. The darkening fields flung past, unreadable indicators hissed past, the sky went turquoise, Prussian blue, indigo, rusty black in the lights of the way. She slept. She dreamed, and when she woke, remembered that she had dreamed something she didn't want to remember. Her mind ran loose and nauseous for a moment, and then she began to worry about credit cards, about whether they could or would trace credit cards. The world was small now, which was good, you could move in it with ease. But everything was linked to every other thing, and that wasn't good.

She got out at Avignon, several hours later, and took a train to Montpellier and Barcelona. Shortly after Avignon, the train stopped at Nîmes, and there she got out. It was perhaps the coincidence, the almost coincidence, of the names, *Nîmes*, *Nimmo*, that decided her. It wasn't a city she knew anything about. No one would look for her there, for that reason. She set off, in the warm southern darkness, on

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the high-heeled sandals in which she had come down that staircase, carrying her bag. The city has big boulevards, with plane trees, and she kept to these, walking briskly past cafés spilling light onto dark pavements, past squares, past alleys. She followed signs to Jardin de la Fontaine because that sounded like a refuge, and thus found herself outside the Hotel Imperator Concorde, which looked, and was, large and comfortable. She went in and booked a room. The room was curtained and shuttered. There was a large bed with a sprigged Provençal quilt, rose and gold on cream, to match the curtains, which she pulled back, revealing tall, sun-blistered shutters and a small balcony. She looked out; below was a walled garden, full of trees, cypresses and olives, and with a fountain bubbling in golden light in a pale green blue pool. She closed the shutters again. She found she had a semicircular bath in tawny pink, tiled round with eighteenth-century birds in pink on white glaze. She bathed and put on her nightdress. She put out the lights and got into the large bed. She remembered briefly the windbreak and the painted avalanche, broken trees and dislodged rocks in the arrested rush of carefully painted snow. She thought she would move money, tomorrow, out of the Jersey account, and then move it again, and then move it again. The bed was like a nest, the pillows frilled, the sheets crisp. She was afraid of not sleeping, but slept. In the morning there were bright needle stripes of light in the shutters. When she opened them, there was the blue sky, full of pale yellow light.

Breakfast was on a terrace, sheltered by a glass wall, under a canopy. Beyond the terrace was the walled garden, with sandy paths, a bubbling fountain in a stone-rimmed pool, and a huge stone bowl overflowing with ivy-leaved geraniums, scarlet, crimson, pink. There were tall cedars and pointed yews; there was a group of silver olives and cypresses. There was bright light, dappled light, shade. It was the south. Under one of the cedars a man was writing at a folding table. He was a blond man, with a head of glittering pale curls. His

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long legs encompassed the little table. He wore white trousers, and a pale, blue green linen jacket.

After breakfast Patricia went out. The hotel looked across Quai de la Fontaine to the Jardin de la Fontaine, a landscaped eighteenth-century space, with orderly terraces, stone stairs, balustrades and carved fauns and nymphs. The houses along the quai are dignified, heavy, eighteenth century, barred and shuttered. A wide channel of green water runs under bridges, under high plane trees, along the quai. In the distance a fountain rose and shone in a high foaming spray. Patricia turned the other way, into the narrow streets, crossing a wide boulevard. The buildings are close together, made of a warm cream and gold stone, with roofs of overlapping terra-cotta tiles. Patricia walked. She walked between heat and shade, from cool stony courts to sudden bright squares, between heavy carved doorways into white spaces where she blinked and saw water. She saw many fountains, pouring from huge stone mouths, trickling over stones, bubbling in circular pools around bronze figures or flowing along channels. Once she saw a high sculpted crested monumental spout in the centre of a grassy place she did not cross, turning back into the small streets. She began also to notice crocodiles on bronze studs in the streets, the reptile chained to a palm tree. The same motif was repeated in windows, on street signs. A life-sized bronze monster crawled over the edge of a fountain in a quiet square. She sat beside the water, under a parasol, and ordered a coffee. She was a girl, a girl on her first solitary trip abroad. She stared at the energetic bronze claws and curving tail, as she had stared at the golden stones and the blue sky and the shadows, curious and indifferent. "Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun: so is your crocodile." He had played Lepidus. He had wanted to play Antony but had had to be content with Lepidus. She remembered, with her fingertips, smoothing artificial sun-tan into his white English tennis-playing thighs, sinewy and

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pale. She remembered the toga. She stood up again, leaving her coffee untouched, and began to walk. She stepped lightly, like a girl.

She shopped. She bought a pair of flat white sandals, two pairs of linen trousers and some floating dresses in airy cotton, painted with dark purple grapes on a yellow that was French, a mustardy, ochre yellow, not like the daffodil yellow of the bright suit she had travelled in. In the Rue de l'Aspic she found an elegant bathroom boutique and spent time in front of mirrors holding up lawn nightshirts printed with seashells, gowns sprigged with mimosa on glazed cotton, a classical column of falling white silk jersey pleats, which she bought, adding a pretty pair of golden slippers and a honeycomb cotton robe in aquamarine. These things gave her pleasure. She told the proprietor, an elegant young woman with dark hair and eyes and a Roman nose, that she herself was in the business. She spoke a slow, clear, grammatical French. She had meant to be a theatre designer; they had all been theatre-mad, at university; but she had made a success of *Anadyomene*, instead. She admired a treasure cavern full of translucent beakers in sand-blasted glass, rosy, nacreous, powder blue, duck egg. She bought a gold and silver striped toothbrush. She went out and walked. She went back to the hotel and ate lunch on the terrace, in the dappled garden, listening to the steady plash of the fountain. She went upstairs, arranged her purchases in cupboards and drawers, closed out the afternoon heat with the heavy shutters and slept, curled on the counterpane. In the evening she took a bath, dressed in her new dress, and went down to dine on the terrace. There were stars and a new moon in an indigo sky. The fountain was lit from underneath, like a moving cube of glass or ice, white with blue shadows. An owl called. She had a floating candle on her table in a tall stemmed glass cup. She saw these things with the pleasure of a postwar girl. She ate a salad of avocados and *fruits de mer*, arranged like an open

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flower; she ate *loup de mer*, a small silver square of fish criss-crossed with golden lines, on a bed of melting fennel; she ate red berries in a bitter chocolate cup; she drank Pouilly-Fumé. There was an excess of pleasure in the simplicity: stars, flames, water, the scent of cedars and burned fennel, the salt of olives, the juicy flakes of the fish, the gold wine, the sweet berries, the sharp chocolate, the warm air. She ate ceremoniously. There were other murmuring diners. At the other end of the terrace was the long man with the mass of blond hair. He was bent at an angle, holding a book to the light of his candle. She thought: tomorrow I will get a book. She thought slowly: getting a book was a pleasure proposed, like the purchase of the nightdress. After dinner, she went upstairs, bathed again, slowly, in the circular bath with its Provençal sprigged curtains, put on the pleated nightdress and slept. A crocodile slipped through a dream and went under the surface as she woke. She breakfasted on the terrace and went out again to walk in the little streets.

The next few days she repeated. She ate, she slept, she walked, she shopped. She learned the little streets and arrived from many narrow openings at the heavy, high pile of the Arènes. It was a closed golden cylinder, made of tiers of immense arches. She avoided it. She swung back into the narrow streets. They brought her out to the Maison Carrée, a severe cube with tall pillars, ancient in its sunny space, and to its elegant shadow, the Carré d'Art, a vanishing and beautiful series of cubes of silver metal and grey-green glass. She went into neither. In a bookshop she bought a guide to Nîmes, a town plan, a dictionary and the three Pléiade volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in French. It would be her project. She began to read in the after-lunch hush, and soon saw that her dictionary was inadequate. She returned to the bookshop and bought their largest. Her French was not good enough to read Proust. She had to look up twenty or thirty words on each page, so that she pieced together the world of the novel in slow motion, like a jigsaw seen through

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thick, uneven glass, the colours and shapes hopelessly distorted, the cutting lines of the pieces the only clear image. This difficulty encouraged her to persist. She would learn good French, and then she would see Proust. She could not, she thought, sustain an interest in anything easy, a detective story or anything like that. A project was good. She bought a notebook and made a patient and lengthening list of words she couldn't understand in Proust. She sat in the walled garden of the Hotel Imperator Concorde, under the cedars, at a wrought-iron table. Scented gum dropped on the pages of *Du côté de chez Swann*. Mosquitoes hummed like wires. Under another tree the blond man read and wrote furiously. His wrist movements were ungainly. He rocked the table as he wrote.

She had her hair cut. Her English waves became a close shining cap. "I am reading Proust," she told the hairdresser, a young man in black, with the Roman nose of the Nîmois. "That will take a very long time," he observed. In the little guidebook, studied over coffee in the Place de l'Horloge, and the Place d'Assas, she had discovered that the ubiquitous emblem of the crocodile chained to the palm tree derived from an Augustan coin, dug up in the Renaissance, with crocodile, palm and the phrase, COL NEM, *Colonia Nemausis*. It was believed that Nîmes had been peopled by Augustus's legionaries, to whom he had given the land in gratitude for their victory over Antony and Cleopatra, on the Nile. François I of France had granted the city the same coat of arms, in perpetuation of the myth. The guidebook said there was no reason to believe the story. Patricia, sitting by the solid and gleaming bronze crocodile in the Place de l'Horloge, had a sudden vision of Tony in a toga, white against the white light and the white spray of the fountain. They had met through student theatre, a classical world of greasepaint and sewn sheeting and Shakespearean rhythms and clarity and ferocity. He had been Lepidus, and she had sewn and fitted the sheets. Later he had graduated to Hector in *Tiger at the Gates*, and

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she had made him a scarlet cloak and a crested Trojan helmet; she had fitted thonged sandals round those stalwart legs. The student theatre was a dark hot box, peopled by flitting ghosts too puny for their lines, but fiery, all the same. It was hard to remember, here in this square, where the stones were Roman stones, the spotlit flaring passion of that imaginary wooden box. He had called her Patra, and she had called him Antony, in those days, in secret. Large, kind Tony, through whom Shakespeare's lines spoke strong and clear, and to her. They had whispered them to each other. "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved." "Then must you needs find out new heaven, new earth." They had appropriated what many had appropriated. He wanted passionately to be an actor, for a year or two, and then gave up the idea quite suddenly. So that the singing words and the brighter light of the dark box became less interesting than the complicated light of common day, so that the drama of international negotiation took over from the eloquent simplicities of love and death and power. But he could always make her smile by calling her Patra. It was a joke and not only a joke. All this she acknowledged and did not acknowledge, seeing and not seeing the lines of Hector's harness, the folds of Lepidus' toga on thin air and trickling water, beyond the dark crocodile.

She was getting thinner. She ate, but she got thinner. Other guests came and went, but she stayed. So did the blond man in the blue-green jacket. He had bought a straw hat, like the hat in which Van Gogh painted himself in the days of his madness in the fields of light around Arles. The hats were sold around the Arènes, by itinerant pedlars, woven domes ending in ragged spikes of reeds. It perched on his tough blond curls without denting them. She began to lose her sense of the businesswoman she had been, was. She walked the streets more purposefully as her sense of purpose wavered. Her French was improving rapidly. She would stop and read the local newspaper, the *Midi Libre*, which was set out on

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polished wooden rods in the hotel salon. Most of the contents of this paper concerned bullfighting. She realised slowly that she was in a bullfighting hotel; on the walls of the bar were photographs of Hemingway and Picasso, who had stayed here to admire the skills of the shining pigtailed dolls, with their braid and gilt and cockades. Later she noticed that the bar itself was called the Bar Hemingway. In the newspaper also were accounts of other kinds of combat, in which the heroes were the bulls, whose more complex rushes were rewarded with standing ovations and renderings of Carmen. There was almost no foreign news in this journal; what there was was North African, bombs in Algiers, tourists attacked in Egypt. And local news: school concerts, the building of cisterns, the pollution of rivers. She read it all, for the French language. One evening she sat on a sofa in the shade and worked her way through it. "Yet another traffic accident on the road to Uzès. A man was killed by a speeding car, as he stood on the edge of a vineyard. His body was found by a cyclist. From the marks on the road it was clear that the killer had made off immediately, without stopping to offer help, or to ascertain whether his victim was dead. This is the third such accident in the region this year. The police are searching . . . "

Patricia began to weep. She thought of the unknown dead man in the road, and tears poured down her face. She moved no other muscles; she sat on the camel-coloured sofa, a dignified ageing woman, with the newspaper in her lap, and her tears splashed onto it, darkening the newsprint, the grainy dark photographed bulls, the catalogue of accidents. She could not move. She could not see. She could not imagine a moment when the tears would stop, or she would be able to stand. She suppressed all sounds; not a whiffle, not a sniff, not a whimper. Just salt water.

After a long time, certainly a very long time, she heard a voice.

"*Excusez-moi, madame, est-ce que je peux vous aider?*" She did not move. The tears ran.

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He knelt at her feet, in his blue linen coat, clumsy on one knee. His French accent was clumsy, too. He changed to English, the excellent English of the Scandinavian North.

"Please forgive me, I think you need help."

"No." Her voice came from far away. She was not even sure she had spoken.

"Maybe I can help you to your room? Bring you a drink, perhaps. I cannot watch—I cannot watch—I should like to help."

"You are kind," she said, and swayed. His words were kind, but his voice was a harsh voice, a cold voice.

"You have a great grief," he said, still harshly. She heard it harshly.

"It doesn't matter. I must. I should."

He put a hand under her elbow and helped her to stand.

"I know your room," he said. "Come. We will go there, and then I will send for a drink. What would you like? Tea, coffee? Something stronger, for the shock? Cognac, perhaps?"

"I don't know."

"Come."

He supported her to the lift. He called it. It was a gold-barred lift, an old, creaking, handsome lift, like a birdcage. He managed the doors, he held her elbow, he led her to her room, he supported her. He sat her in her armchair, with its rosy chintz frill, and looked into her swollen eyes. His face swayed before her, a white face, with ledged blond brows, a large ugly nose, blue, blue eyes in deep hollows above jutting cheekbones, a wide, thin mouth with a white-blond moustache.

"Thank you," she said.

"Let me call for a drink. I think cognac would be best." She inclined her head. He used her phone, he called room service. He said "You have a great grief, I see."

"My—someone—is dead."

"Ah. I am sorry."

She could think of no answer. She put her head back and

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closed her eyes. She could feel him standing at a respectful distance, watching her until the waiter knocked. He opened the door, and left with the waiter. She gulped the cognac, shuddering, and went to bed.

When she passed him at breakfast the next day, she nodded silently, acknowledging him. They did not speak, and she thought she was pleased. Over dinner that night, they smiled coolly again, from opposite ends of the terrace, unexpressive northerners. She was surprised therefore, at the end of the meal, to find him bending over her table. He wondered, he said, if she would take a *digestif* with him, in the bar. He did not mean to take up much of her time. She thought of saying no. There was an awkwardness in his acknowledgement that she might not want to speak to him. She said yes, because she owed him something for his kindness, and because there was no warmth, no pressure, in his invitation. The Bar Hemingway is a glass box, which juts from the terrace into the garden. It is full of warm deep yellow light. On the walls are photographs of the matadors who have slept in the hotel, who have put on their embroidered waistcoats, their sculpted breeches, their long sashes, in its shuttered rooms, and gone out to dance their absurd deathly dance with cloak and sword.

They sat, side by side, looking out at the dancing blue cube of water in the dark garden. He ordered eau-de-vie Mirabelle, with ice, and she ordered the same, indifferent. He said,

"My name is Nils Isaksen. I am from Norway."

"My name is Patricia Nimmo. I am English."

The drinks arrived, sweet, white, glistening liquid over shattered fragments of ice. The taste was fire and air, a touch of heat, an after-space of emptiness. And the mere ghost of a fruit. She would have liked to say something banal, to keep communication to a safe minimum, and could think of nothing at all. He said,

"I am here to write a book. I am an ethnologist. I am studying the relations between certain Norse beliefs and customs, and those in the south."

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It was a prepared little speech. He raised his glass to her. She said,

"I am on holiday."

"I have never been able to spend an extended time in the south. It was always my dream. I too, have lost someone, Mrs Nimmo. My wife died, after a long illness, a very long illness. I find myself—detached—and—and—well-off, you would say? I wanted no longer to see Tromsö. So I work here."

"I am sorry. About your wife. I have just lost my husband."

"And you do not wish to speak of this. I understand. I do not intend to speak of Liv. Do you find much to interest you in Nîmes, Mrs Nimmo?",

"I somehow haven't done the things one should do. I haven't walked in the Jardin de la Fontaine, I haven't been into the Maison Carrée, or the Carré d'Art."

"Or the Arènes?"

"Or the Arènes. I find that rather horrifying. I don't like the idea of it."

"I don't like it either. But I go there, often. I sit there, in the sun, and think. It is a good place to think, for a man from the north who is starved of sun. The sun pours into it, like a bowl."

"I still don't think I'll go. I find all this—" she gestured at the photographs of bulls, matadors, Hemingway and Picasso, "simply unpleasant. The English do."

"You are temperate people. I too, find it unpleasant. But it needs to be understood, I find. Why does an austere Protestant city go mad every year, for blood and death and ritual?"

He bent his pale head towards her. His pale blue eyes shone. His bony white hands were still on the table, each side of his ice-misted glass. She said,

"I hope you do come to understand it. I shan't try."

After this they had several more brief drinks together, in the evenings, which were getting hotter, and heavier. Patricia did not think she liked Nils Isaksen, and also felt that this

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simply did not matter. The nerve endings with which she had once felt out the shape of other people's feelings were severed or numbed. She got no further than acknowledging to herself that he was in some way a driven man. His reading and his writing were extravagant, his concentration theatrical, his covering of the paper—wrong somehow, too much, or was it that she felt that any effort, any energy, was too much? The pleasure was going out of *A la recherche* though she persisted, and her French improved. They talked about Nîmes. He told her things she hadn't wanted to know, hadn't been at all anxious about, which nevertheless changed her ideas. He told her that the city and the water of the fountain, Font Nemausus, were one single thing; that this closed, walled collection of golden houses with red-tiled roofs in a dustbowl in the garrigue had been built because of the presence of the powerful source. That the god of the town, Nemausus, was the god of the source. That under and beyond it were gulfs, caverns, galleries of water in the hill. That there had been a nunnery on the hill above the fountain, around the temple of Diana, from 1000 to the Renaissance, whose abbesses had claimed ownership of the water. He spoke of excavations, of pagan antiquities, of religious wars of resistance to Simon de Montfort, to Louis XIV, to the Germans. He spoke of the guillotine in the Revolution, and the gibbet in the second world war. Patricia listened, and then went shopping, or wandering. She thought, if he talked much more, or overstepped some boundary, she would have to move on. But she did not know where she would go. The weather was getting hotter. The weather map on the television in her room showed that Nîmes was almost invariably the hottest city in France, uncooled by coastal breezes, or mountain winds, a city on a plain, absorbing heat and light. She took longer walks, for variation. She went into the Jardin de la Fontaine in the midday heat, stared into the green troubled depths, climbed the unshaded, formal staircase with its balustrades, observed a crocodile made of bronze-leaved plants in a bed

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of rose and white flowers, curving its tail over its back, yawning vegetably, in the dancing bright air. Nils Isaksen told her she shouldn't go out without a hat. She wanted to reply that she didn't care. She said, "I know" but did not buy a hat. Let it bake her brain, something said.

One evening Nils Isaksen broke his cautious bounds. Patricia was very tired. She had taken three eaux-de-vie Mirabelle, instead of one, and saw the cedars shifting across the too spangling stars.

"I should be happy," said Nils Isaksen, "if you would come with me to the ethnological museum. I should like to show you . . . "

"Oh, no."

"I should like to show you the tombstones of the gladiators. So young. We can read the life of a city, in its monuments—"

"No, no—"

"Forgive me, I think you should make some change. I am impertinent. When I first lost Liv, I wished the whole world to be dead, too. Frozen stiff, I wished everything to be. But I exist. And you, forgive me, you exist."

"I don't need company, Mr Isaksen. I don't need to be—entertained. I have—I have things to do."

Before his intervention, something had been going on, in the silence. He had spoiled it. She stared angrily at him.

"Forget I spoke, please. I am in need of speech, from time to time, but that is nothing to do with you, as I can understand."

The dreadful thing was, that her refusal had made more of an event, had brought them closer together.

The next day she decided, as she walked along the Boulevard Victor Hugo, that she would certainly leave Nîmes. She kept in the shelter of the plane trees, like a southerner. She decided that, since she was leaving, she would do the city the courtesy of going into the Maison Carrée. Ezra Pound had said it was a structure of ideal beauty. She had read the guidebook. It was made of the local *pierre de Lens*, shining

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white when quarried in the garrigue, turning golden with time and sunlight. It was tall, high on a pedestal, with Corinthian columns ornamented with acanthus leaves, and a frieze of fruits and heads of bulls or lions. It had been the centre of the Roman forum, part of a Franciscan monastery, owned and embellished and pierced by Visigoths, Moors and monks. Staircases had been raised and razed round it. In 1576 the duchess of Uzès had decided to transform it into a mausoleum for her dead husband, but the City Fathers had resisted. It had been a place of sacrifice according to Nils Isaksen, who had a Viking bloodthirstiness under his bloodless skin.

She climbed the high steps of the portico and looked out between the columns at the human space around the ancient house. She could see the discreet, vanishing gleam of the Carré d'Art, across the *place*. The guidebook told her that the square house was now a museum for the city's archaeology, the endlessly unearthed Pans and nymphs, dancers and gladiators. But the guidebook was out of date. There was nothing there but red ochre paint and a few informative placards. What do you do in a dark red space, full of stony air? Patricia walked along, around and across. She remembered wondering when it made sense to stop looking—at a pictured dandelion, a windbreak, a frozen avalanche. She went out of the Maison Carrée in a dreamy rush, across the portico and down the steps. Between the *place* and the narrow maze of little streets runs a cobbled lane, along which cars and motorcycles run, occasionally and unexpectedly. The heat and the light dazzled her. She blinked at the dark, bright blue, at the burning white. She narrowed her eyes and plunged forward. Several things happened. A screaming—brakes and a bystander—a grip like a claw on her wrist, twisting and dragging. She was on her knees in front of the square house, looking up at the violet form of Nils Isaksen's face above her, framed by his white-gold curls, and the spiky rim of his hat. Somewhere

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beyond, a dark driver, with the Nîmois Roman face, was making a speech of mingled reproach and regret.

"You cannot make him an accomplice—that is to say, responsible—" said Nils.

"Don't be absurd. I was dazzled."

"You looked neither to right nor to left. I saw. You threw yourself under his wheels."

"I did not. I could not see. The sun dazzled me, after the dark."

"I saw you. You threw yourself."

"And how did you come to be there?" said Patricia, one human being to another. She stood up, wiping dust and blood from her knees and the palms of her hands like a schoolgirl. She bowed to the driver and made a gesture of abasement with her head and arms. "How?" she said, to Nils Isaksen.

"I was passing by. I thought I would ask you to have lunch with me. I stepped forward to do that, and you plunged. So I was able to take hold."

"Thank you."

They ate lunch under an ivory-coloured parasol, next to the fountain with the unmoving energetic crocodile. Patricia had quails' eggs in aspic, pale little spheres in translucent coffin shapes of jelly, flecked with sprigs of herbs. Her palms and her knees were stinging as they had not stung since school playgrounds. The sunlight packed down, dense and brilliant. The canvas was not enough protection. Sweat ran along her upper lip, between her breasts, in the crook of her elbow. Nils Isaksen had an angry red line between his hair and his shirt collar. Blood pulsed beside his Adam's apple, ruddy where all should have been pale. He asked if she liked her aspic. He had chosen barquettes of *brandade de morue*. A northern fish, he said, the codfish. It seemed illicit and unnatural, made into a paste, would she say?—a purée?—with olive oil. And garlic. Excuse me, he said, you have dust on

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your cheeks, from your fall. May I? He touched her cheekbone with his napkin. All the same, he said, you took a plunge. I will say no more. But I was watching. You launched yourself, so to speak, from the plinth of the Maison Carrée. I would like to be able to help.

"Help," she said. "I don't believe in help. I believe . . . "

"Yes?"

"I believe in indifference," said Patricia Nimmo. "The flow of things. Anything. One thing, then another thing. Crocodile fountains. Dust. Sun. Eggs in aspic. I'm talking nonsense. The sun's moved. It's in my eyes."

"We could change chairs. I have dark glasses. I have a hat. Please—"

They stood up. They changed places. Nils Isaksen said,

"I understand you. You will think I don't, but I think I do. To me indifference is a temptation, fatally easy. You will say, That is insensitive, he has understood *nothing*, he is a fool, everybody believes indifference is bad, but I, Patricia Nimmo, have secret wisdom, I know there is good in it. That is what you think, don't you? Whereas, Mrs Nimmo, I dare to offend you by saying, I have been there, I have tried indifference, it is a good station for changing trains, then it becomes—cement. Cement. You did not launch yourself into the path of that Corvette out of indifference."

"Out of the purest indifference. If it was a launch, it was out of indifference."

"We are in deep."

"Talking does no good."

"I should like to recommend curiosity. You must take an interest. Curiosity and indifference, Mrs Nimmo, are opposites, you will say. But not truly. For both are indiscriminate. You may sit there, glass-eyed while things slip past, what did you say, eggs in aspic, crocodile fountains, the stones of this city. Or you may look with curiosity, and live. I am trying to learn this city. It is not a trivial undertaking. I am learning these stones. You are right, in part, I believe it is a matter

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of indifference what you learn—or rather, it is a matter of blind fate, which has a creepy way of looking like destiny. But you must be curious, you must take an interest. This is human."

The truth was, Patricia thought, with a trace of her old wit, he looked dreadfully inhuman as he said this, staring like a gargoyle, his pale skin flaking in patches, his yellow-white curls sweat-streaked, his lips stretched with evangelical fervour. He did not create curiosity about himself, by no means.

"I take an interest in you," he said, plucking off his dark glasses and turning a dazzled blue stare on her.

"I don't want a guardian angel, I'm afraid," said Patricia, pushing back her chair.

"Afraid?"

"I'm sorry. I don't want, that is what I mean, I don't want—" She stood up and walked away in the white-gold air.

Because she forgot to pay for her lunch and also because she possibly owed him her life, she went with him two days later to the museum. The building stood, almost Roman, around an inner courtyard, round whose walls, in a kind of cloister, were partly ordered rows and heaps of ancient burial stones, dignitaries, priestesses, warriors, some with effigies, portly matrons with heavy heads of hair, noseless busts in togas. Inside were more stones, much older, menhirs with strange whiskered faces and fine-fingered pointy hands, a sabre-toothed tiger, the skull of a Stone Age survivor of one trepanning who had died at the second attempt. Patricia walked briskly, and Nils walked slowly, calling her back to look at choice objects. "My favourite," said Nils Isaksen, "fresh with life, look here, the Roman flower seller from Vic-le-Fesc."

It was a white stone, carved deep.

NON VENDO NI
SI AMANTIBUS
CORONAS

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He translated. "I do not sell my crowns, except to lovers."

"I can read Latin. Thank you."

He took her to see the gladiators. Lucius Pompeius, net-fighter, put to combat nine times, born in Vienna, dead at twenty-five years, rests here. Optata his wife, with his money, made this tomb. Colombus, myrmidon from Severus troop, twenty-five. Sperata his wife. Aptus, Thracian, born in Alexandria, dead at thirty-seven, buried by Optata his wife. Quintus Vettius Gracilis, a Spaniard, thrice-crowned, dead at twenty-five. Lucious Sestius Latinus, his teacher, gave this tomb. There were only replicas in the glass case in the museum. Nils said he had hoped to be able to work on the tombs of these dead fighters. Three or four centuries, he said, of dead young men, swordsmen and net throwers. From all over the Empire and beyond, buried now under cafés and cinemas, patisseries and churches. Ten or so had got turned up by accident, he said, over the centuries, out of the thousands. He hoped to find a northman, perhaps.

"Why?" asked Patricia, without curiosity.

"A buried berserker, with his amulets. It has been known."

"He would have done better not to come here," said Patricia. "Hypothetically."

"Do you know," said Nils, "that there is a theory that Valhall, in the Grimnismal, was based on the Roman Coliseum? Valhall was described with 640 doors—a circular place where the spirits of warriors fought daily and the dead were daily revived to feast on hydromel and the flesh of the magic boar, until the last battle, when they would go out to fight, 800 at a time, through the 640 gateways. The northern paradise is perhaps linked to these stone rings here. We were fighters."

"*Tant pis*," said Patricia. "They died long ago. Leave them in peace."

"Peace—" began Nils. But she had walked away from stones and bones, along a corridor, up a stair.

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In a long narrow dim room, she came face to face with two stuffed bulls. They faced the doorway, balancing trim muscular bodies on delicate hooves, pointing sharp horns, staring from liquid brown glass eyes. They had been reconstructed with anatomical intelligence, with respect. They had been killed a century apart, "Tabenaro" in September 1894, "Navarro" in 1994 at the centenary corrida for the Granaderia Pablo Romero from which both came. Their hides were both glossy and dusty, Tabenaro pied, Navarro a flea-bitten iron grey. Both skins were slashed, ripped and stitched together like patchwork quilts, flaps reconstructed round the wounds of pic, or banderillas, of the sword. Behind them, along a central island, trudged a dusty procession of beasts, a sample of rejects from the Ark, some wearing their reconstituted fur and skin, some standing bleached and bony. A wild boar, *sus scrofa*, and five striped piglets; a Siberian bear; a musk bull and calf; two differing deer; a looming derelict moose; a young dromedary, its ears frayed to bare holes, but its eyelashes long, tufted and curving; behind this dusty beast the bone cages of a giraffe and a llama; behind these a Camarguais calf, a very small Camarguais foal and the skeleton of a Camarguais horse; behind these the huge bony head of a whale beached in 1874 at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer.

Round the walls of the long room were other beasts in cages: monkeys and sloths, weasels and beavers, spotted cats and a polar bear, orangutan and gorilla. In one glass case were curiosities, two-headed sheep, a monster with one gentle face and two bodies trailing eight woolly legs.

And the reptiles. An amphisbaena, leathery brown, long harmless local snakes, asps in jars. *Aspic commune. Vipère aspic, vipera aspic, Lin.* And mummies of crocodiles from Egyptian tombs, boneless, long, leathery parcels, nîmois.

"*Le crocodile, animal sacré des anciens prêtres égyptiens, était embaumé après sa mort, on le trouve en abondance dans les tombes.*"

Nils Isaksen loomed behind her. He pointed out, to please

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her, that the text engraved above the roof arch was English, from Francis Bacon, 1626.

Interprète et ministre de la nature
L'homme ne peut la connaître
Qu'autant qu'il l'observe."

"Curiosity," said Nils Isaksen. "You see."

A very large caiman was rampant on the wall behind him, not discreetly tubular like the Egyptian mummy, but clawed and curved and brightly glazed.

"We are the only people here. The dust makes me want to sneeze. The poor beasts should have been let die decently."

"Look at the love, in the pose of those bulls, in the stitches."

"Love?"

"Of a sort."

"Horrible."

"Interesting."

That night, as usual, they dined separately, and then drank together in the bar. Patricia was disinclined to speak. The glass angle of the bar was brightly lit in the shadowed garden. The fountain bubbled and splashed. Nils Isaksen said he had something he would like to show her. He emptied out the pockets of his blue green linen jacket on the glass table between them. There was a scattering of stones—one or two mosaic tesserae, a fragment of the golden Lens stone, a sphere of black shiny stone, a handful of sunflower seeds, a crudely carved amulet of an iron hammer on a ring.

"I found it in an antique shop," said Nils Isaksen. "In a tray of little things dug up by workmen, bottles and coins and beads. I know what it is. It is Thor's hammer. It is Mjölnir. It will have come from a grave, maybe of my berserker gladiator. They were everywhere in those days, these little hammers. In marriage beds and graves. To help the spirit on its way to Valhalla, perhaps. Or perhaps to prevent the ghost from rising to stalk the living. Maybe there are more under this pavement. Maybe."

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"Are you sure it is so old?"

"Decidedly. It is my profession."

Patricia picked up the little dark ball. When she turned it in the candlelight it sparked with a blue fire that ran in veins and flakes in its glossy substance.

"Pretty," she said.

"Labradorite," said Nils Isaksen. "A kind of feldspar." He hesitated. "When I put up the tombstone of my wife, Liv, I made it of a single slab of labradorite. It is a costly stone. It flashes like the Northern Lights in the land of the Northern Lights. I wrote on the stone only her name, Liv, which is to say, Life. She was my life. And her dates, because she was born, and died. It is in a small churchyard, surrounded by bare space. It is too cold for trees or bushes, mostly. I put a hammer in the grave with her, Mjölnir, as my ancestors would have done. Thor was the god of lightning. There is lightning in the labradorite."

Patricia put the stone down, quickly. Nils Isaksen stared through the glass at the cedars and olives and flouncing water.

"In the town beyond my own, towards the Arctic circle, there is a single tree. Those towns, you know, are as far from Oslo as Rome is. Further than Nîmes. Every winter, people wrap the tree, they shroud it against the cold. The sun does not rise for months, we live in the dark, with our shrouded tree. We imagine the south."

He pushed his stones, his seeds and his amulet around the glass tabletop, like counters in a game.

Patricia slept deeply, at first. She woke suddenly, from a confused dream of long corridors, lined with high glass cases. She went to the window. The square pane framed the huge liquid ball of the moon's light, a full moon. The sky was spangled with stars. The light poured from the moon onto garden walls, and the great stone bowl of geraniums, fiery in daylight, now silver-rose. The air-conditioning cranked and hummed. She put her forehead on the glass. A rhythm strug-

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gled to be remembered. "This case of that huge spirit now is cold." She moved her lively golden toes in the soft carpet and rubbed her face on the almost-cold glass. When she opened the window, the night air was warm on her skin, though the moonlight was cold.

She ordered breakfast in her room. She slipped out early: even so the air was like a hot bath as soon as she was beyond the shadow of the Imperator Concorde. She went to the Carré d'Art. It is a beautiful building, discreet, ghostly, absent, a space of grey glass cubes on fine matte steely pillars, taller than the Maison Carrée but deferring to it, with a kind of magnified geometrical repetition and transformation of the proportions of its elegant solidity. Inside, up the wide, steep staircase, in the calm muted light was an exhibition of the work of a German, Sigmar Polke. Patricia's attention was churning, like water boiling in a jug, a stream of rising currents, a troubled, jagged surface, a downdraught, a bubbling up. She floated from room to room, her sandalled feet soundless, her lavender muslin skirt wafted round her cool knees. Sigmar Polke is strong and witty and various. The old Patricia would have been delighted. There was a wall of images of watchtowers at the corner of barbed-wire fences. There was a room full of gay, charming images of the French Revolution. A pile of parcels, a triangle, two cubes, a diagonal, brightly spattered with tricoloured motifs, a flower, a Gallic cock, which resolved itself into the blade, ladder and basket of the guillotine. Two eighteenth-century mannequins playing in an Arcadian field with a ball, which turns out to be a severed head. In another room, a blown-up drawing of Mother Holle shaking out snow from her featherbed in the clouds. A high room full of huge, romantic, stained sheets of colour, labelled *Apparizione*. Gilded puddles, seas of cobalt and lapis, floating milky and creamy clouds and vapours, forked mountains, blue promontories, crevasses and fjords of swirling indigo, pendent rocks hanging over crimson and russet lakes with

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dragonish jaws or long fingers of purple and bleached bone clutching froth, veiled Norns and mocking ghouls, drowning white birds and crumbling citadels. The text beside these visionary expanses emphasised vanishing and danger. Polke paints with currently discarded pigments that are poisons, orpiment, Schweinfurt green, lapis. He mixes unstable chemicals: aluminium, iron, potassium, manganese, zinc, barium, turpentine, alcohol, methanol, smoke black, sealing wax and corrosive lacquers. His surfaces shift and dislimn, the stains change, become indistinct, no shapes hold, no colours are stable. The world of these apparitions is ghastly and lovely. Patricia stared. Here were beauty and danger, flat on a wall. She said in her head, "What shall I do? What can I do?" She stared at the falling veils of melting snow, of curdled cream. How do you decide when to stop looking at something? It is not like a book, page after page, page after page, end. How do you decide?

On the top floor of the Carré d'Art, behind the stair, is a balcony. You can step out there, and suddenly there is no smoky glass between you and the heat and the light, you can look over the city, the intricate circling of red-tiled roofs, like flattish cones. You can see the Tour Magne, on the skyline. Patricia went out. The hot air was as solid as the glass. You could touch it with your finger. She floated over to the balustrade, and looked out and down at Nîmes. She leaned back in a corner, she leaned back and stared at the dark bright blue. She was light, she was insubstantial, in her shadowy lavender dress. She leaned out. Out. The heat fizzed in her eyes and ears. Her feet left the ground, she balanced, she leaned. A hand took her waist and dragged. Nils Isaksen grasped her other wrist for good measure. His face loomed craggy in the shadow of his Van Gogh hat. It was a very angry face. His feet were planted like lead and his knees pressed against hers as he dragged her back into the box of the balcony.

"Leave me alone."

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"How can I?"

"Very easily. Go away."

"I think not. Not yet."

They walked in hostile silence out of the gallery and faced each other in the hot sun on its steps.

"Please," said Patricia, English and icy, "just leave me alone."

"I think I should—"

"I am going to have to leave this town because of you. Because of your interference in my life."

"Because of my interference in your death," said Nils Isaksen.

Patricia began to walk away, brisk and furious. She did not look behind to see what he was doing or not doing. In the Place d'Assas there is no shade. There are many modern fountains, carved in the gold stone—a huge head spewing clear water into a long narrow channel, a naked pair of youth and maiden, in bronze, catching water from a columnar structure in a pale aquamarine circular pool. Patricia came to the middle of the square and began to shake. She stumbled towards the pale blue under the dark bright sky and fell on her face towards the water, like a desert traveller in a film. Her stomach heaved. The sun clanged in the sky like a gong. Tears squeezed between her hot lids. She fell forward to drown in two inches of warm water. And the large bony fingers of Nils Isaksen gripped again, pulling her back by her shoulders. Between the sun and her eyes was no more than a black space, a shadow carved with spikes. He pulled her to her feet and she fell into his arms, gulping and staggering. He put his arms round her for a moment, and then transferred the Van Gogh hat from his white curls to her bronze cap. She clutched him.

"Come in," he said. "Out of the sun."

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They sat together in her bedroom, Patricia in the chintz chair, Nils Isaksen gawky on the pretty desk chair. The air-conditioning groaned. It was only the second time he had been in her room. He wiped her face with a cold flannel, and poured her a glass of water from the minibar. He said,

"This cannot go on."

"It is not what you think."

"I will tell you a story. In Norwegian it is called *Folgesvennen*. In French it is *Le Compagnon*. The Companion? It is about a young man, who dreams of a beautiful princess and when he wakes, sells all he has and sets out in search of her. And when he has walked far, and farther than far, for months, in the deep winter, he comes to a church. And outside the church is a block of ice. And in the ice is a dead man, standing upright. And when the priest comes out of the church, the young man asks him what the man is doing in the ice. And the priest replies that he is a great sinner who has been put to death, and stands there to be spat at. And it would take more money than anyone is prepared to spend on such a sinner to lay him in the ground. So he just stands there.

"When I think of you, walking up and down in the heat with no hat," said Nils Isaksen, "I think of the block of ice."

"How does it go on?"

"Oh, the young man asks what the dead man's sin was. He was a butler, says the priest, who watered the wine. Not so terrible, says the young man and gives the remains of his savings for the dead man to be chipped out of the ice and decently buried. So then he has nothing and goes on his way. And that night a man comes to him and proposes to be his servant, and the young man says he has nothing left to pay a servant. So the other says he will come for fellowship. So he comes, as a companion. And they have many adventures. They meet three old women—troll women—in three caves. Each hag invites the young man to sit in a stone chair. Each time the Companion insists that the old woman herself sits there, and she cannot refuse, and the chairs do their work,

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and seize them and will not let them go. And from each old hag the Companion takes a treasure in return for the promise of her release—a sword, and a thread, and a magic hat of invisibility. But then he leaves them sitting there and breaks the bargain. I have observed," said Nils Isaksen, "that Norwegian heroes are particularly given to bargain-breaking. They make compacts with trolls, and think nothing of cheating."

"It is not what you think," said Patricia.

"What is not what I think?"

"The body in the ice. I am not the dead man. I left him."

She told Nils Isaksen then, more or less, the story of the day in the Narrow House, and of Tony's fall, and of how she had left her life behind and come to Nîmes.

"So you see," she finished. "You buried your wife, under that stone, and I—I walked away. I did not see why I should not walk away."

There was a long silence. Patricia was filled with dread, that was the word, by the uncanny aptness of the man in the ice. She told Nils Isaksen how she had fled; she expected, perhaps hoped for, judgment. But he appeared to be struck dumb by her story.

"I did not think I did wrong," she said. "I loved him, and he died, and that was an end. Enough of an end. But it feels wrong, terribly wrong. Not to the children, which is what you might think, leaving them to—look after—things. But to him. I left him."

Nils sat looking out of the window.

"What happened, in the rest of the story?"

"The princess was found. In one of those castles with a fence where the skulls of past suitors are on every post. She set the young man three tasks—things to keep safe overnight, a pair of gold scissors, a ball of gold thread—which she stole back. She was bewitched, she was the lover of a troll to whom she flew every night on the back of a ram. But the Companion made himself invisible, and followed, and seized the scissors

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and thread, and returned them, so in the morning the boy triumphed after all. So then she said, bring me tomorrow what I am thinking of at this moment. And he said, how can I know that? And he despaired. But the Companion followed again, he followed again, and heard her tell the ugly troll, it was his beloved head she was thinking of. So of course, the Companion decapitated the troll with the magic sword, and brought back his head. And the next day, the boy threw it down before her. And then she had to marry him. And then the spell had to be broken, with alternate baths in milk and in ashes, I remember, certainly with bathing her skin. And then she became his good wife. And the Companion went away, and after five years returned to claim his reward. So the young king gave him half of everything he had. And the Companion said, there is one thing more, born since I left. And the young king and queen brought out their son, and the young king raised his sword to divide the boy, as justice required. And the Companion held back his hand, and said, no, you owe me nothing, for I am the spirit of that man who was frozen in the block of ice. And now I may go to my rest in peace. It is a dark story, Mrs Nimmo."

"Not altogether."

"You are right, Mrs Nimmo. You have done wrong. To the living, and to the dead. It can be set right, I think. You can return and set it right."

"Thank you," said Patricia gravely. And kissed his cool, bony cheek.

She did not sleep that night, but lay awake, still and calm, visited by hypnagogic moons and stars and waves lapping on seashores, or skies lit with flaring curtains of blue and crimson light, as though she had stepped, or fallen, into some world of mythical absolutes. When she came down in the morning, Nils Isaksen was nowhere to be seen. The hotel lobby and dining room were full of people and life. It was the time of the Corrida, and the matadors and their retinues were moving

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into the Imperator Concorde. Two or three photographers lounged against pillars. Dark Spanish faces nodded ceremoniously to each other, as bundles of bright cloth and weapons went into the gilded lift-cage. Patricia paid them little attention. She went out and walked through the morning, fluid and automatic, from fountain to fountain, crocodile to clocktower, Memnon's head to the naif bronze lovers. She avoided the Arênes, as usual. In the evening the town was packed with crowds of festive Nîmois; there were bursts of music and fireworks. Patricia avoided it all. She was not in that world. She looked in the restaurant and the garden for Nils Isaksen, and he was nowhere to be seen. On the first day she thought easily that she could wait—time had become a coloured cave of light in which planets rolled like plates, and fish leaped, and toothed reptiles floated and paddled. On the second day she thought once or twice that she saw him at street corners, but it was always other tall men in straw hats or linen jackets. She tried sitting in the garden, but that too was full of *aficionados*, drinking cocktails, discussing faenas, moving naked bronzed shoulders gracefully under the great linen parasols. On the second evening she saw Nils Isaksen, but he did not see her. He was quarrelling with the receptionist. It might have been the kind of quarrel guests have, when they have been politely requested to pay bills they cannot pay. The old Patricia, sharp as a needle, would have picked up a clue from the intonation, or a gesture. The new one, floating largely in some other dimension, registered the quarrelling with difficulty, and was about to approach Nils, to whom she needed to speak, to whom she now needed very much to speak, when she registered dimly that he was drunk. His arms and legs and head were not working together, his voice was loud and uncontrolled, his face was hot. She backed away. She went up in the lift, and lay on the bed. She ordered supper through room service, and it took a long time to come, because of the eddying tauromanic crowds in the body of the hotel. On the third evening of the Corrida she made her way past the

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Bar Hemingway to see whether Nils was on the terrace, or alternatively whether there was a quiet table where she could sit and watch the fountain. The fountain had been turned up, perhaps in honour of the matadors. What used to be a bubbling aquamarine cube of suspended liquid was now a high spraying column, flailing a little in the air, like a turning horsetail, throwing bright droplets and white shoots of wet over the grass. At the far end of the terrace, she saw, through the real glass wall of the Bar Hemingway and the molten glass cocoon of her own consciousness, a struggle round one of the dinner tables. She could hear shouting, but no words. There was a group, like Laocoön and the serpents, one figure rising above a mass, holding above his head what seemed to be a silver buckler and a flashing bottle. It was Nils Isaksen, his blue-green jacket stained with what could have been blood, or could have been red wine, his hair dishevelled and his mouth open in a roar, fighting off a cohort of white-aproned waiters led by the maître d'hôtel in his uniform. One or two dark Spaniards stood close, involved but not active. The mass of men swayed this way and that; the plume of water swayed this way and that in the dark garden; Nils Isaksen felled the maître d'hôtel with what Patricia could now clearly see to be a heavy silver dishcover, and was himself brought down, more or less pinioned with napkins and tablecloths, and half-led, half-carried, still struggling, into the hotel. Patricia turned to the barman and ordered an *eau-de-vie framboise*, on ice. She sat down, inside the glass wall, and stared at the cubes of ice. The barman was explaining the disturbance to a young couple.

"Nothing serious. No, no. He criticised the *spectacle*. Not a wise thing to do in Nîmes, certainly not during the fête."

"What displeased him?" asked the young husband, laughing, his arm round his wife's silky brown shoulder. "The quality of the bulls, or the art of the *torero?*"

"The *mise à mort*," said the barman. "He comes out of the North, somewhere. They don't understand the death of the bulls."

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The young couple laughed again, easily.

"The culture is different in the Mediterranean," said the barman. He saw Patricia listening and changed the subject, easily, deftly, to the beauty of the night, the brilliance of the moon, the prevalence of shooting stars in this season.

Patricia made no attempt to find out what had happened to Nils Isaksen. She did not see him again until the Fiesta was over, and the toreadors had ceremoniously driven away in their polished old limousines, with their acolytes, their strapped trunks, their bright capes and swords.

When she saw him it was in the street, in the Rue de l'Aspic. He was looking into a shop window, his hat pushed forward over his knobbed brow, his skin spangled with unshaven gold bristles. Before she reached him, he loped away, ungainly and hurried. She followed. She followed even when he crossed to the entrance of the Arènes, bought a ticket and went in. She waited a little, and then bought a ticket herself and stepped into the circle.

The Arènes is not a labyrinth. It is an orderly structure of tunnels, colonnades, staircases, rising, diminishing rings of stone seats, open to the sky. At first, having gone in, Patricia walked round in the cavernous arched dark of the ground-level circuit. It smelled of musty stone and stale urine, the urine of frightened beasts, partly masked with eau de Javel. The silence in it is numb and dumb. There were Coca-Cola machines and bins of empty champagne bottles. She made one and a half circuits in the gloom and then plunged at random under an archway and up a stair, coming out suddenly, perhaps four tiers up from the sanded circular arena, with its intricate raked pattern, its red-painted wooden screens behind which men sprang or scrambled out of the way of the plunging horns. The bottom tier was very close to the ground. She had read in the guidebook that it was not thought that there had been wild-beast fighting, because the barrier was too low for safety. Only men ingeniously slaughtering men,

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and men ingeniously, elegantly, dancing the great beasts on their delicate hooves, to standstill, shuddering, and the knife. Over all those centuries, people had come there to sit together, festive, and watch death.

She found it hard to see, in the light. She looked around and could see neither Nils Isaksen nor anyone else. She ducked back under her archway, made another segmented progress, climbed another stone stair, reached an upper open gallery and walked round. From the height of the heavy stone cylinder she looked down, and saw a straw hat and a patch of innocent Norse blue green, across the great space of the circle. So she went on, round and down, and sat on the warm stone, shaped roughly to hold her, beside him. The silence was at the same time the stony silence of monuments and the airy hot silence of midday in open spaces. It was hot, very hot, the stone was hot to touch. Below, the patterns in the swept sand were pretty and sinister. She sat still for a time, and he sat, his head in his hands, and did not move. Black birds wheeled over, high up, in their own circles.

"Nils."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Why should you think I am in trouble? Yes, I am in trouble. Now leave me alone, please, Mrs Nimmo."

"I saw you fighting."

"I was berserk." With a certain gloomy self-approbation.

"I saw. Why?"

"Because of what you told me. And because I came here, to see the bullfighting."

Patricia was silent, not understanding. She stared round the white rim of the circle. He said, into his hands,

"I thought it would be a mystery. And it was simply disgusting."

"I could have told you that, without needing to come," she said, taut and English.

He said something in Norwegian.

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"What was that?"

"*Jeg er redd jeg var død lenge førenn jeg døde*. 'I was a dead man long before I died.' Peer Gynt. The great liar. The great Norwegian folk hero. A tissue of lies and old tales and boasting. I lied to you, Mrs Nimmo. You did not lie to me, and in the end you told me—what you told me. And I took it upon myself to be judge and confessor. But my lies are worse. What I have done is much worse."

"I should like to know," said Patricia, although mostly she did not want to know, and feared vaguely that the dead wife had been killed, that she was to be forced to hear something unspeakable.

"I am not an ethnologist, Mrs Nimmo. I am, or was, a junior schoolteacher. I don't know archaeology. I never married. My wife is a lie, and the labradorite stone is a lie. All lies."

"And the town with the one tree?"

"That is true. I lived there. I lived there with my mother and my aunt, and taught school, until I had to give up. Three years ago, my mother died. She was eighty-six. I inherited the house, and her savings."

Patricia waited. The black birds circled.

"She had not known who I was for five years. I did everything. I washed her. I clothed her. My aunt sat and smiled and sang. Sometimes she cried. Then she too—deteriorated. I had to give up my teaching because I had two old women in wheelchairs in one house, nodding and babbling, and shouting too, they could get very angry, they got very angry with each other . . . Then my mother died. My aunt and I buried my mother in the churchyard. The labradorite stone is a story I told myself, when I found a little piece in a shop, and it reminded me of the North."

"And then your aunt died?"

"No. Then, Mrs Nimmo, I packed suitcases, and sold the house, and wheeled my aunt onto the train and went south to Oslo. And from there I took her to Stockholm. There is a famous clinic there, a neurological clinic. I took her in there, Mrs Nimmo. I had not made any appointment. We were not

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particularly remarkable. The clinic was full of people like us. We met nurses in the corridors, and my aunt raised her hand to them, like a queen, and they smiled. I walked up and down, quite quickly, looking for a long line of people. There was one outside the pharmacy, everyone waits there. I put my aunt in her chair, in this queue, in the hospital corridor. She was smiling at everyone, she usually did, she was a nicer woman than my mother. Then I left, Mrs Nimmo. I had *premeditated* my act like a criminal. There is nothing in my aunt's clothing, or her handbag, to say who she is, or that she came from the North. Then I came here. By hazard, as you did, as you told me you did. I got on trains and travelled south. Europe is one, now, my movements were unremarkable. I had all my money with me. It was very premeditated, Mrs Nimmo."

"But understandable. You were at the end—at the end—under terrible strain."

"It was wrong. We both know that. I had a Calvinist upbringing. I burn already," said Nils Isaksen, gaunt and hunched under the fiery disk of the Mediterranean sun over the stone skeleton of the amphitheatre.

"I think perhaps you did the best you could—"

"I did not tell you this sorry story in order to hear you say that, Mrs Nimmo. I told it to hear it told aloud. Now, if you will excuse me, I have things to do."

He stood.

"Will you be all right?"

"It is no concern of yours. But thank you. And yes, I shall be all right."

He walked away, into the tunnelled arch, not looking back.

That night, she dreamed. She was in the arena, sitting where she had sat with Nils Isaksen (who had not been at dinner, or in the bar). The sky was black night, and starry, in the dream, but the sand of the arena was shining with sunlight. In its closed bright circle, two men fought. They wore unbleached white canvas or linen suits, like professional

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fencers, and wore also fencing masks. They had an extraordinary arsenal of weapons heaped around them. Trident, the rhetor's weighted net, short swords, long swords, heavy long swords, stilettos, poignards, mace and battle-axe. They went at each other, gracelessly and doggedly, with all these things in turn, inflicting dreadful dints and savage thrusts, so that the canvas became crisscrossed with slits, and great gouts and gashes of blood spouted from both hidden bodies and soaked into the cloth and into the bright surrounding sand. Blood poured too out of the blank wire faces of the masks. First one, and then the other, were beaten to their knees and hacked at horribly from above and below. It all took a very long slow time, and Patricia was not permitted to turn her eyes away, or leave her stony seat, or speak or wake. When they were at a standstill, a strange thing happened. All the red blood, in which terrible strips and slivers of flesh, external and internal, floated and stuck, turned back. All the carnage flowed back, quickly, into the two men, peeling off the sand, shrinking and vanishing in stains on the buckram, so that they were again fit, pale figures, surrounded by gleaming pristine blades. And then they bowed to her, turned somersaults in the swept sand and began all over again, hacking, thrusting, bleeding.

She noticed, in the way of dreams, that someone was sitting next to her, had perhaps been there all the time. It was Tony, looking solid and well, leaner than on that last day, and smiling. He did not speak. The bloody men had been real and inescapable. She wanted Tony to stay. She was dreadfully happy to see his living face, the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, the kink in his left brow, the warm lips. She knew then that this very real man was not real, and felt anguish. He would go, and she would wake. She said,

"Why are they doing that?"

He smiled, as though the slaughter was normal and agreeable. He did not speak. He put a warm hand on her knee. This made her cry, and she woke.

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The next day, she saw Nils Isaksen in his usual corner on the breakfast terrace. She walked straight over to him. He did not stand to greet her. She asked him if she could sit down, and he made a grudging gesture of assent. She said,

"I have decided to go back to England, Mr Isaksen. Not permanently. Just to see what they have done with him."

"They?"

"My son and my daughter."

"You did not speak of them."

"They would not have wanted—to have to worry about me."

"You have made sure they must," said Nils Isaksen, with a touch of ice.

"I wondered," said Patricia, "if you would—care to—accompany me?" She was thinking in French, *Voudriez-vous m'accompagner?* Her English sounded odd. He asked, unsmiling,

"What had you in mind?"

"Mr Isaksen, I must see where my husband is buried. I should not have left him. Beyond that, I don't know."

"I have nothing in the world to do, Mrs Nimmo. I will come with you."

Some days later, they found Tony's grave, in the churchyard near Benjie's weekend cottage, in Suffolk. The church was one of those towered East Anglian flinty bastions. Benjie's children had been christened there. The churchyard was walled, and grassed over, with yews and cedars. Patricia had supposed that it was too early for any memorial to have been put up—there were problems, she believed, with the settlement of the soil—so she missed the grave for some time, looking for recent digging, a temporary wooden marker. It was Nils Isaksen who found Tony, all staring white, a cruciform white marble headstone standing at one end of a white marble-bordered rectangle full of glittering white marble chips. He called to Patricia, "Here is Nimmo," and she came along the path, and read the incised grey writing. Anthony

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Piers Nimmo. His dates. Beloved father of Benjamin and Megan. There were no flowers. Patricia had brought anemones, crimson, purple, dark blue, wax-white. She stood there, holding them, and Nils Isaksen found a jam jar and filled it at a tap by a kind of gardener's shed. Patricia put the jar of flowers carefully at the foot of the stone. She stood there, listening to an invisible blackbird and the soft wind in the branches. Nils Isaksen stood at a distance, not pretending not to be there, not ostentatiously doing something else, but at a distance. Patricia opened her handbag and took out a dark eyebrow pencil. She wrote across the top of the stone, in careful capital letters, smaller than the incised ones:

THE ODDS IS GONE
AND THERE IS NOTHING LEFT REMARKABLE
BENEATH THE VISITING MOON.

She said to Nils, who came up to read her graffito,

"When I first knew I loved him, I was terrified he would die. I would lie awake at night, muttering these lines to myself. You get drunk on unreal sadness, but I was truly afraid he would die."

They stood together. The earth smelled strongly of mould, and humus, and the energy of decay. Patricia said,

"I hate this sort of thing. The chips, the square bed, all that. I like the earth, you know, a sort of slow vanishing. This is vulgar."

"It has a certain splendour. It reminds me of snow and ice and the North."

"I should telephone Benjie and Megan. You are right, I have treated them badly. They must know I'm alive and not ill, the bank will have said . . . "

"You could send them a postcard."

"A postcard?"

"For a beginning. You could send it from Oslo or Stockholm. Or Trondheim."

"You are going back?"

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"Not permanently. Just to find out—what became of the old lady."

Patricia had not been quite sure until that moment that the old lady was not an invention. She stood in the green English churchyard, staring at the glittering expanse of white chips framed in a white stone square. She remembered Nîmes, like a hot blue and golden ball, containing creamy stone cylinders and cubes. She thought of the unknown North, the green fjords, the ice, the lights, the one tree. She said,

"You would like me to accompany you?"

Nils Isaksen shuffled his ungainly feet on the moist path.

"I would not take up too much of your time. But yes, I should be grateful. Then—in that case—it becomes possible."

"Then I will come," said Patricia Nimmo.

They walked slowly away, side by side.

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Portfolio

Four Drawings

Malcolm Morley

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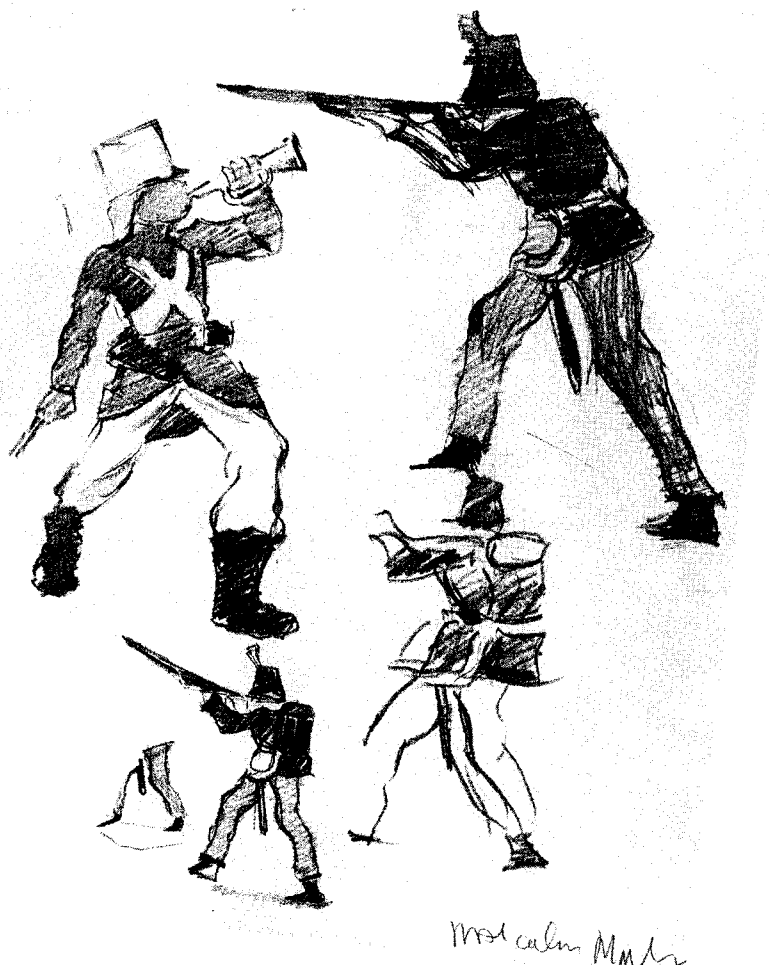

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A Conversation with Malcolm Morley

Malcolm Morley, who has been described by the artist Les Levine as "the last modernist," was born in a suburb of London. A working-class boy, he had dreams of being a gang lord, but drifted into a life of petty crime and wound up doing three years in the infamous jail Wormwood Scrubs. It was in "the scrubs," as hard cases call the joint, that Morley read Lust for Life, *Irving Stone's middlebrow best-seller about Gauguin and van Gogh. Van Gogh came as a thunderbolt. Morley joined the art class, took a correspondence course in illustration and swiftly became pretty good at watercolors.*

Until his release, the only art Morley saw was in the fuddy-duddy magazines his mother sent him in jail. He was twenty-two. He showed his work to his parole officer and got a place at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. He was shown a Picasso his first day. Thunderbolt number two. From Camberwell, Morley went to the Royal College. It was the mid-fifties and his contemporaries were the British pop artists. The working-class ex-con loathed them for their sleekness. He moved to New York in 1958 and has lived there ever since.

Morley first gained attention for paintings that meticulously reproduced photographic images. He would pick a postcard,

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pencil a grid onto a canvas and paint the image, square by square, as oblivious to the subject matter as if he were making an abstract painting. It was an astonishing process of self-deprivation, a way of dealing with a very deep rage. Other painters were soon working in the same vein, and the movement acquired a name: photo-realism. Most artists loathe the tags that critics attach to their work, and Morley is no exception. "It's a class idea," he says. "It's really based on the idea that the working class like art that looks like photographs. My interpretation, by the way."

I visited him in Bellport, Long Island, in the converted church in which he lives with his Dutch wife, Leta, and paints, to pick up the drawings you see here. We sat and talked a bit about the way he works.

INTERVIEWER

How did you break with photo-realism?

MALCOLM MORLEY

I was working on a racetrack painting. Underneath it said *Grayville, Durban, South Africa.* I was thinking about race. And Grayville made me think of Jasper Johns. All those grays. That painting had been completed on a Friday. On Monday *Time* magazine was coming to the studio to take a photograph of the painting as the apogee of photo-realism. This was through the auspices of Ivan Karp the Manhattan art dealer On Friday night I went to see a movie. It was the Yves Montand movie *X* by Costa-Gavras. It's very good, very political.

When I came out of that movie I was really furious. I wanted to kick a cop right in the balls. Then I came back to the loft and there was the painting. And I thought, Okay, I'm going to put an *x* on this picture. I didn't just get a can of paint and paint an *x*. I was with Tony Shafrazi, and we rehearsed these *x*s on sheets of transparent plastic. It was really a very considered endeavor.

Anyway a very thin *x* in red was painted on a sheet of

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plastic the size of the painting. And then I simply reversed it, and printed it on the painting. And the painterliness of this *x* is really beautiful. Oddly enough, it goes through the winner. The center of the x is on the winner.

The guy from *Time* came that Monday and took one look and fled. Ivan was really pissed.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever paint another photo-realist painting after that?

MORLEY

No. I don't think I did.

INTERVIEWER

Tony Shafrazi, who is now a successful Manhattan dealer, was once notorious for spray painting KILL LIES ALL on Picasso's *Guernica*, which then hung in New York's Metropolitan Museum. Did you *x* your own painting before or after this?

MORLEY

Oh, this was long before. It was me who did *Guernica*. Unfortunately, Tony got the wrong idea. He must have got the flavor of what it's like to do that. Because it's rather liberating.

INTERVIEWER

Your second coming was as a fierce and vivid Neo-Expressionist. To this extent, you are the godfather of much of what happened in the eighties. But for you—unlike many of the Neo-Expressionists—everything is real, and raw. Some years ago you decided to return to the fine old practice—regarded by few with favor these days—of painting in the open air.

MORLEY

I was in Crete. I told some friends I was going to go out painting on this nudie beach, where you have to climb impossible mountains to get to, so that grandmas can't accidentally get there. They said, Oh, this is very dangerous because at

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twelve o'clock today the mistral arrives. These very, very high winds.

So I'm walking over the mountains with this canvas on my back. It's about four feet long. I got on the beach and set up the canvas to do an oil painting out of doors, which I hadn't done since I painted John Mills's house on Richmond Hill. Sir John Mills was a famous British actor. It was the house that Sir Sloshua Reynolds—that's what William Blake called him—had lived in.

Anyway, the winds came. An enormous gust took the canvas off the easel and spun it like a boomerang. There was a couple, nude. The guy was Chinese-American. It just scraped his stomach. It must have sailed two or three hundred yards. It had a little paint on it, and he got a little bit glazed with paint. Had it hit him, it would have killed him. I was eating grapes. I offered them this bunch of grapes as a gift and I made a vow to the gods that I would never do an oil painting out of doors again.

INTERVIEWER

Watercolors are something else, though.

MORLEY

I was in Norway at a reception for my retrospective at the museum in Oslo. That was last year. I was talking about how much I wanted to do a freighter voyage. A friend of the museum said, You can go on one of my freighters. The freighter sailed from Canada to Cape Town and back. It took heavy industrial equipment to Cape Town and loaded up with ore.

It was a painting trip. No trips are anything but that, except for going to an opening. We flew to Cape Town and stayed there for ten days. I read a lot of South African history. Then we got on the freighter, which was called THOR 1. It had a huge Viking god on the bow. We were in a squall and very high seas. Even the first mate was lying down, saying, Why am I at sea? A real sailor's lament. But my wife is Dutch.

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She decided to do the laundry. The captain, who was a true Viking, loved her, and at night the two would drink acquavit together.

Meantime I'm painting from postcards of African animals. I was connected to the thought of Turner being lashed to the mast. I painted on deck. Watercolors. Very good ones, actually. About ten. You could very dimly see the coast of South Africa. We were going up to a place called Richards Bay, where all the raw ore was loaded onto the ship. It was hell. Total hell. It looked black. The air was black and heavy. Very mean. There is no Africa anymore. It's gone.

Out of Africa. It's artists who are going to have to create a world of visceral reality.

INTERVIEWER

But now that a plurality of artists seem to be fiddling around with computers and video and web sites and virtual reality and photography, and the rest of the techno-armory, what room is there for a painter?

MORLEY

It's because of that that there is room for a painter. Not in spite of that. *Because* of that.

—**Anthony Haden-Guest**

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Drama or Melodrama

Alain de Botton

I

At breakfast, Claire conveyed the message that she had had enough. She did so very gently, very softly, playing with the gold chain around her wrist, tugging a little at the sleeve of an olive-green cardigan, scratching her cheek briefly, the execution of the lover carried out in such a delicate manner that it was perilously easy to think, if only for a moment, that nothing whatsoever had happened. The tap continued to drip, the fridge to let off its intermittent shiver, the newspaper to advertise a weekend in Paris for lovers for £109 (return). Had a West London equivalent of Mount Vesuvius erupted at this moment, and miraculously preserved the physical evidence of the scene in lava, there would have been nothing to suggest that this had been anything other than a cosy breakfast between two people (surely close friends, even a couple, the museum caption would read, for did you see how close they were sitting?), in a narrow dilapidated kitchen decorated in an erratic arrangement of buttercup-yellow and lime-green tiles.

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II

In the summer of 1863, the art critic John Ruskin was on a walk across a valley in the Engadine region of Switzerland, when the sky darkened abruptly to an ominous grey-black hue. Having been warned of the severity of summer storms in the valley, Ruskin ran to find shelter in a mountain hut, and from its safety, witnessed a most violent natural commotion breaking overhead.

Rain began lashing down, jagged lines of lightning streaked across the sky, followed by bellowing, tearing sounds, as if the earth were opening up or the planet disintegrating. The windows shook from the sound of thunder, a nearby tree took a direct lightning strike and split down the middle, its insides smoking from the electric charge. A river that ran alongside the house swelled to bursting point, rushing by in a dark brown frenzy, carrying with it a tortured medley of broken branches.

It looked as if the end of the world had come, as if this were the moment of death and of apocalypse. But of course, it was no such thing, it was merely a passing thunderstorm in a little valley in Switzerland, a storm that would be over in under half an hour, would kill no one and would disappear from public memory shortly after.

The contrast led Ruskin to the idea that thunderstorms were what death, and dramatic events, generally *should* be like, but usually were not; the idea that our life's dramas rarely look as dramatic as they are. Our most cataclysmic moments are typically free of gravitas, of necessary thunder; a person dies, but instead of the sky darkening and lightning striking, the sun continues to shine and the birds to sing. Someone drops overboard to their death and the seagulls circle charmingly and the fish swim on. One person tells another that they no longer want to grow old with them, *and the toast pops up.*

III

Claire: Oh, I forgot I'd put them in.

She turns rapidly towards the counter, removing two slices of lightly tanned bread.

Claire: Would you like one of them?

I: No. Thanks.

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Claire: Are you sure?

I: Yes, thank you.

Claire proceeds to spread an olive-based margarine over the tanned slices, conscientiously reaching to cover each corner.

Theatrical lines because, in contrast to the novel, it is only what is said that one hears on stage, the audience given the crest of the iceberg and left to imagine the bulk below.

IV

The person (in mythology, it is always a man) who leaves his house one morning saying he is off to buy a packet of cigarettes, and then simply never returns, is usually judged the most cowardly example of how to tell someone it's over. Why didn't the wretch buy the Marlboros, come back home and generously explain the issue?

Yet, for all the brutal lack of courtesy, there is something arresting, even impressive about the cigarette man, for he has pushed to the limit the saddest but perhaps most ineradicable feature of a breakup; that the reasons behind it cannot (if one is humane) ever be articulated to the rejected. Why not then resort to this mute flight, which in its Beckett-like austerity, at least reflects the bleak truth of the situation?

Instead, "I just need to work out where I am in my life" filled in for "you're insufferable"—eerie similarities here to seduction, the phoney gentleness with which bad news was broken acting as an echo of the way that in more pleasant, seducing days, there was a "perhaps you'd be interested in seeing a play with me; *The Birthday Party* is opening on the weekend"—this when the concern was not so much the theatre of the absurd as an overpowering wish for an embrace.

If rejectors don't walk out of the house like the cigarette man, it may simply be out of a childishly irresponsible wish to continue to be loved, *loved even by those they no longer love*. And yet how much kinder it would be to stop *wanting to seem nice*, and really *be* nice, which would mean doing everything possible to allow the rejected person to hate the rejector and thereby forget them quickly.

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V

Which Claire was far from doing. In subsequent days, there were phone calls to check the patient had not committed suicide.

In the telephonic exchanges, Young Werther did his best. He enquired as to the progress of her garden, the health of the mother, asked how work was going (Liz had forgotten a file on a train, but a kindly soul had picked it up and called the firm).

Would she have suspected the flavour of the hidden thoughts?

VI

Herzog, the hero of Saul Bellow's novel of the same name, has been left by his wife. Herzog is a civilised man, a thoughtful, sensitive professor of literature, yet when his wife leaves him, so does his reason. He retreats from others, and in his country house, takes to writing letters not only to his ex-wife, but to everyone he knows, even to people who don't know him but who he is familiar with from television and the papers. These are frank letters, a chance for Herzog to abandon the half-heartedness social life imposes on us so as to tell them, all of them, what is really on his mind—and hence go a little mad.

Dear Mr President,

I listened to your recent optimistic message on the radio and thought that in respect to taxes there was little to justify your optimism . . .

Dear Professor Heidegger,

I should like to know what you mean by the expression, "the fall into the quotidian." When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?

Dear Mr Emmett Strawforth,

I saw you on television making a damn fool of yourself. Since we were undergraduates together, I feel free to tell you what I think of your philosophy . . .

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VII

There was an identification with Herzog (always helpful, identification, for the bookish in crisis), for I too took out a pad and arranged myself on the bed, my head supported by pillows, scribbling with a Biro letters I knew would never be sent, but nevertheless needed to be written.

Dear Claire,

Only a few months ago, when we came back from Dan and Harriet's, you were feeling particularly loving, you put your head on my shoulder, and told me—with no prompting from me (you might quite easily have broached another topic, for instance the state of primary education in the country or the unusually clement weather at the time) that you loved me and that you would never leave me. I am sorry to be so literal, I am sorry to take words at their value, but what exactly did you mean by this declaration? Were you aware of what you had said, or was it simply the effect of one glass of wine too many? Whatever the answer, do you not agree that there is a responsibility on a person who makes such declarations. My knowledge of the law is shallow, I am certain that a jury would have no particular compassion for such a case, but have you paused to imagine that you broke a promise, broke an intention, and could hence be considered responsible for a breach of contract (at least in theory) under certain interpretations of the law? I draw your attention to a recent case in the United States in which a woman took a man to court for telling her that he loved her, only then for her to find him sleeping with another woman shortly after . . .

Dear Mrs Sedgwick,

Normally, it's the child who never asks to be born—at fifteen in a rage. But, more importantly Mrs Sedgwick, does one ever ask to fall in love? Was there ever any choice with your daughter, or was it not just a form of compulsion, a biological compulsion if one is to believe a recent issue of Scientific American? *May I nevertheless allow myself to comment on certain points in the education of your daughter, particularly her tendency towards emotional flight and abandonment . . .*

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VIII

The idea of taking revenge has something a little old-fashioned about it. If I had lived in a different era, the tale might have concluded itself in one of the following ways:

—the spurned lover murders the new lover of the beloved (there was one, he was called Clifford [Clifford?] and worked in data management), perhaps by gouging out his eyes, or placing him upon a rack.

—the spurned lover attempts to poison the beloved with arsenic.

—the spurned lover finds a suitably high cliff, and jumps off, leaving a suicide note. The beloved, on discovering the note, feels so guilty, that she too jumps off the cliff, to the distress of her friends and family.

—the spurned lover engineers a plot to bring infamy and ruin upon the house of the beloved's parents. Destitute, the beloved begs for forgiveness from the once spurned, now adored lover, who might at this point be sitting astride a horse.

IX

It is hard to say what features of the modern world have made revenge scenarios so hopelessly dated. One could suggest:

—the rise of emotional counselling, and psychotherapy: Othello would now have been urged to take out his feelings on a cushion, to express his anger in an AA-style meeting, and to delve back into his past to discover the roots of his fearsome jealousy.

—the rise of irony as a dominant sentiment in much art and literature. Contrast this with what was going on in Spain, Italy or France around the seventeenth century, a very earnest time: cloaks and daggers, etc.

—the decline in murder as a useful, or indeed glamorous, way of resolving disputes of the heart.

X

And so, in this unheroic age, revenge was limited to a decision that, if ever I ran into Clifford and Claire at a party or in a supermarket, *I would ignore Clifford.*

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I would not shoot myself, or Claire, or Clifford. I would deliver no great soliloquies, I would not be Young Werther after all.

XI

Some thoughts on Goethe's Werther: *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was first published in Leipzig 1774, and at once became a best-seller. The melodramatic story of a young man who commits suicide in the wake of a failed love affair proved of immense appeal to Goethe's contemporaries. Even Napoleon, a busy man, read the book seven times. There was a Werther epidemic, people took to wearing clothes like those of the fictional character, they imitated his mannerisms, pursued doomed love affairs, even committed suicide in Werther style. One Wertherian young man in Berlin shot himself by a table on which he had opened Goethe's book at page 218, the page on which the fictional Werther ends his life. Thanks to Goethe, it was the height of fashion to be unhappy in love and finish oneself off in the grand style.

From the outside, from our standpoint, it looks a touch melodramatic. Even Goethe felt things had gone too far. Doomed love was sad, but not that sad. Things should be kept in perspective. And so Goethe wrote a parody of the work that half of Germany was approaching with such earnest sentimental intensity. In this parody, Werther fails to commit suicide. The gun is old and a little rusty. The bullet only singes his eyebrows and frightens the neighbours. What is more, the woman Werther loves comes around to the idea of him, and so after a while, they decide to get married, grow old peacefully, and occasionally joke about the silly suicide attempt in Werther's youth, that "beastly shot at the head" as they call it.

XII

Notes toward a definition of maturity: indulgence towards the drama, towards the pistol, the thunder and lightning. But also, thereafter, perspective, a touch of parody: those singed eyebrows.

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Three Poems by Lavinia Greenlaw

No Particular Horse

Horses would fashion their gods as horses.
—Xenophanes

Horses with wings and horses with shoes.
White stallions sacrificed to Roman gods.
Scythian kings buried with fifty horses.

Horse sense: a perpetual expectation
of danger. Cave dwellers drove herds
over cliffs for an easy killing.

•

Drawings found in a tomb suggest
the Ancient Egyptians were among the first
to ride horses.

Warm bloods, stud books,
a government incentive for the Irish Draught,
the only ever accidental Cob,

the Arab's dished face and seventeen ribs,
the recessive Albino, chosen mount
of the Lone Ranger and Emperor Hirohito.

•

Horse points, fetlock and foreleg.
As in football or driving,
an offside.

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Gervase Markham's horse skeleton
("worse than approximate") misled readers
for twenty-one editions and a hundred years

until Auzoux's papier-mâché model,
each flayed muscle, artery and bone
labelled with scraps of Latin and French.

•

The horse in war, legendary siege breaker
turned fast offensive transport.
Army vets botching it with gas masks,

paraffin salve and cocaine. Running my hand
along the hooked spine of a broken-backed
roan crippled by a bite from his father.

•

How we still measure distance from on horseback.
Matisse driven at a walking pace
to keep *a sense of the trees*.

Fox Talbot on a train in 1838,
wanting to go no faster than that.
My childhood horse future

of great escapes, crossing the desert
on a walleyed skewbald, leaving it
up to the horse gods. Horse talk.

I can offer no greater sign of trust
than to say you are someone with whom
I would steal horses.

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Acquisitions

Henry Ford boasted
there would be no Egyptian mummies in his museum.

Everything we have is strictly American.
Steam engines, cars and guns

in answer to the amateur anthropologist's
list of set questions:

Is bleeding, scarifying or cupping practised?
Is marriage by capture, exchange or purchase?

A World Where News Travelled Slowly

It could take from Monday to Thursday
and three horses. The ink was unstable,
the characters cramped, the paper tore where it creased.
Stained with the leather and sweat of its journey,
the envelope absorbed each climatic shift,
as well as the salt and grease of the rider
who handed it over with a four-day chance
that by now things were different and while the head
had to listen, the heart could wait.

Semaphore was invented at a time of revolution;
the judgement of swing in a vertical arm.
News travelled letter by letter, along a chain of towers,
each built within telescopic distance of the next.
The clattering mechanics of the six-shutter telegraph
still took three men with all their variables
added to those of light and weather,
to read, record and pass the message on.

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Now words are faster, smaller, harder
. . . we're almost talking in one another's arms.
Coded and squeezed, what chance has my voice
to reach your voice unaltered and to leave no trace?
Nets tighten across the sky and the seabed.
When London made contact with New York,
there were such fireworks, City Hall caught light.
It could have burned to the ground.

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Two Poems by Tim Kendall

Hieroglyphs

I dream you, and you come to me
intact, in focus, indiscreet, mouthing
the sweetest lies as if we cared.

As if, in fact, we might begin again
with needle-tracks and scratches down your arms
that might have told in drunken hieroglyphs

how heavy-shouldered I pick my way
through a night of empty forecourts,
back to the etceteras of passion:

the obligatory pathos of discarded shoes,
the glass of water juddering by the bed,
the face my heavenly eyes avoid.

Chocolate

Aztecs used cocoa beans as currency;
attending countless wives,
the wealthy chiefs would fortify their strength
with flagons of *xocolatl*.

Voltaire drank dozens of cups a week,
and would surely have agreed
with his own Pangloss, who considered
the New World's gift of syphilis
a paltry price to pay
for such unimaginable bliss.

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These things get carried too far—
or so I thought, until late last night
when the pair of us snuggled right in,
with our mugs of creamy chocolate
giving up their ghosts.

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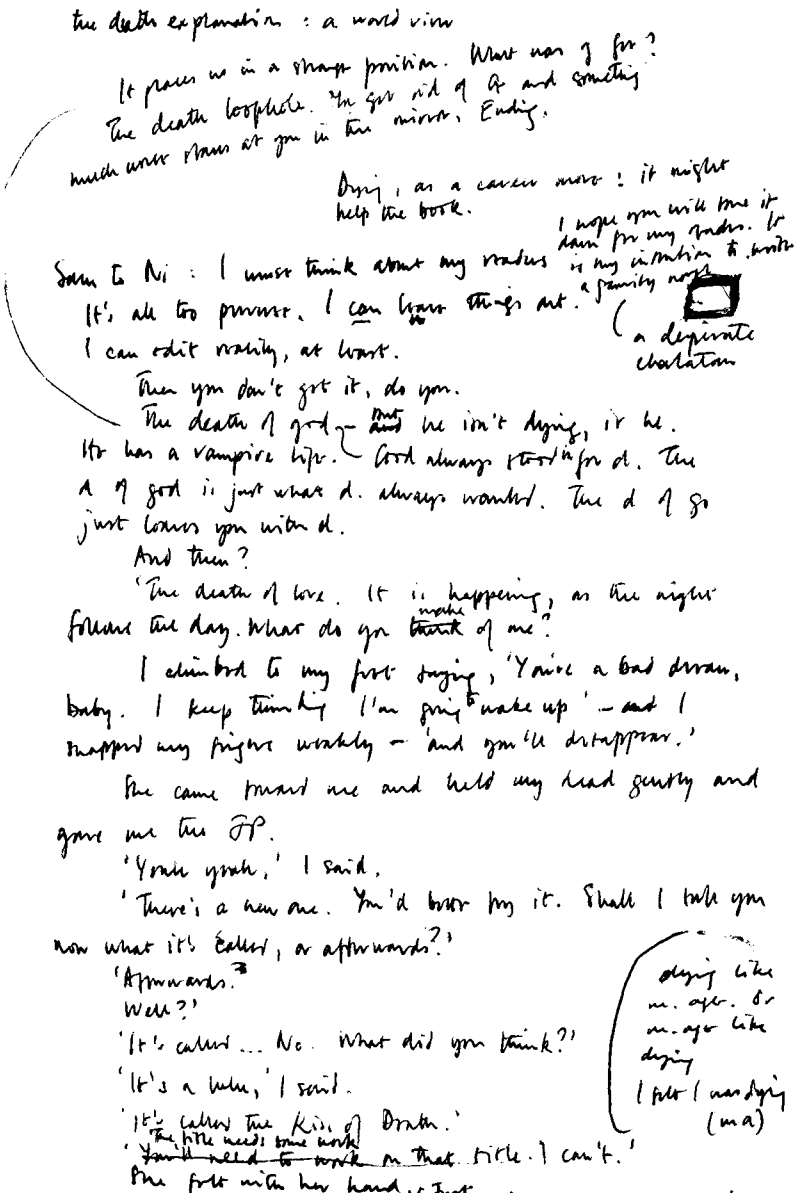
the death explanation : a world view
It places us in a strange position. What was I for?
The death loophole. You get rid of Q and something much worse stares at you in the mirror. Ending.
Dying, as a career move : it might help the book.
I hope you will love it dear for my readers. It is my intention to write a family novel
Sam to Ni : I must think about my readers
It's all too perverse. I can't have things set.
I can edit reality, at least.
a definite charlatan
Then you don't get it, do you.
The death of god — but we isn't dying, it he.
He has a vampire life. God always [illegible] for ol. The d of god is just what d. always wanted. The d of Sp just leaves you with d.
And them?
'The death of love. It is happening, as the night follows the day. What do you make of me?
I climbed to my feet saying, 'You've a bad dream, baby. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up' — and I mapped my fingers wearily — 'and you'll disappear.'
She came toward me and held my head gently and gave me the JP.
'You're yours,' I said.
'There's a new one. You'd better try it. Shall I tell you now what it's called, or afterwards?'
'Afterwards.'
Well?'
'It's called ... No. What did you think?'
'It's a lulu,' I said.
'It's called The Kiss of Death.'
'The title needs some work. You'll need to work on that title. I can't.'
She fell with her hand. 'Just
'Yes you can. You can. Don't think about love. Think about the same thing.'
dying like m. age. Or m. age like dying
I felt I was dying (m a)

A manuscript page from London Fields.

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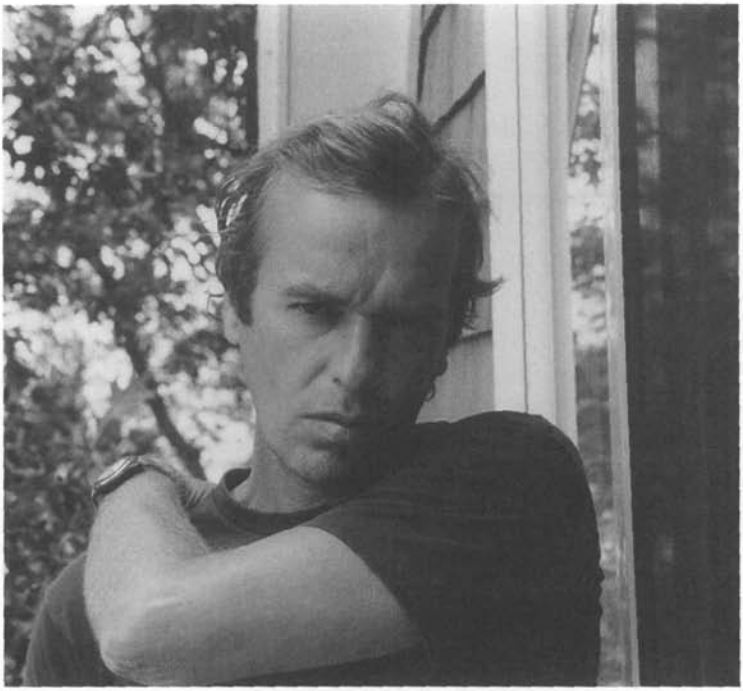

Martin Amis

The Art of Fiction CLI

Martin Amis was born on August 25, 1949, in Oxford, England, where his father, the Booker Prize winning author Sir Kingsley Amis, was a doctoral student. He grew up in the various university towns in which his father taught literature: Swansea, Princeton and Cambridge. His parents divorced when he was twelve.

At eighteen, a role in the film A High Wind in Jamaica *took him to the West Indies. He returned to England in 1968 and, after taking "crammers" (courses designed to prepare one for university), he enrolled in Exeter College, Oxford. He graduated with first-class honors in English. In his early twenties, he wrote book reviews for the London* Observer,

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and soon thereafter worked as an editorial assistant for The Times Literary Supplement. *His first novel,* The Rachel Papers *was published in 1973 and received critical acclaim, winning the Somerset Maugham Award (a prize his father had also been awarded). While at the* TLS, *he published his second novel,* Dead Babies *(1975), which Auberon Waugh referred to as "nothing less than brilliant."*

From 1977 to 1980 he served as Literary Editor of The New Statesman, *a socialist weekly, and wrote two more novels,* Success *(1978) and* Other People *(1981). In 1984, his best-selling* Money *appeared, followed by a collection of journalism,* The Moronic Inferno *(1986), and a collection of short stories,* Einstein's Monsters *(1987), which focused on the nuclear threat and contained a polemical element previously unseen in his fiction.*

London Fields *(1990) again confronted nuclear holocaust and the death of the planet. One critic described the novel as "ferociously impressive." Amis subsequently published another collection of journalism,* Visiting Mrs. Nabokov, *and a novel,* Time's Arrow *(1992).*

Soon thereafter, at the time of his divorce, Amis found himself the focus of a literary feud. When he left his longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh, the wife of his friend and fellow author Julian Barnes, to sign with Andrew Wylie, A.S. Byatt accused him of selling out to pay for the divorce and extensive dental work. His response to the scandal: "Envy never comes to the ball dressed as envy, it comes dressed as high moral standards or distaste for materialism."

Since then, he has written two novels: The Information *(1995) and* Night Train, *a best-selling detective thriller set in an unnamed city in the United States.*

The following interview is the result of several meetings, the first of which took place in the summer of 1990, on a former turkey ranch near Wellfleet, Massachusetts, where he was vacationing. Dressed in tennis gear, tan and relaxed, Amis drank coffee and throughout the afternoon rolled his own cigarettes with a frequency reminiscent of John Self (in

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Money*) who explains to the reader, "Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I'm always smoking another cigarette." Amis now lives in northwest London.*

INTERVIEWER

When you are writing a novel, how do you start out? Is it with character or with theme? Or does something else come to you first?

MARTIN AMIS

The common conception of how novels get written seems to me to be an exact description of writer's block. In the common view, the writer is at this stage so desperate that he's sitting around with a list of characters, a list of themes and a framework for his plot, and ostensibly trying to mesh the three elements. In fact, it's never like that. What happens is what Nabokov described as a throb. A throb or a glimmer, an act of recognition on the writer's part. At this stage the writer thinks, Here is something I can write a novel about. In the absence of that recognition I don't know what one would do. It may be that nothing about this idea—or glimmer, or throb—appeals to you other than the fact that it's your destiny, that it's your next book. You may even be secretly appalled or awed or turned off by the idea, but it goes beyond that. You're just reassured that there is another novel for you to write. The idea can be incredibly thin—a situation, a character in a certain place at a certain time. For *Money*, for example, I had an idea of a big fat guy in New York, trying to make a film. That was all. Sometimes a novel can come pretty consecutively and it's rather like a journey in that you get going and the plot, such as it is, unfolds and you follow your nose. You have to decide between identical-seeming dirt roads, both of which look completely hopeless, but you nevertheless have to choose which one to follow.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you worry, as you go along, that what you've already written isn't up to par?

AMIS

You try to think about where you are going, not where you came from, though what sometimes happens is that you get stuck, and it's really not what you're about to do that's stumping you, it's something you've already done that isn't right. You have to go back and fix that. My father described a process in which, as it were, he had to take himself gently but firmly by the hand and say, "Now all right, calm down. What is it that's worrying you?" The dialogue will go: "Well, it's the first page, actually." "What is it about the first page?" He might say, "The first sentence." And he realized that it was only a little thing that was holding him up. Actually, my father, I think, sat down and wrote what he considered to be the final version straightaway, because he said there's no point in putting down a sentence if you're not going to stand by it.

INTERVIEWER

So that assumed he knew where he was going.

AMIS

He knew a lot more than I do about where he was going. That may come with experience in the craft. I tend to be more headlong.

INTERVIEWER

How important is plot to you?

AMIS

Plots really matter only in thrillers. In mainstream writing the plot is—what is it? A hook. The reader is going to wonder how things turn out. In this respect, *Money* was a much more difficult book to write than *London Fields* because it is

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essentially a plotless novel. It is what I would call a *voice* novel. If the voice doesn't work you're screwed. *Money* was only one voice, whereas *London Fields* was four voices. The eggs weren't in one basket. They were in four baskets. I was fairly confident that the hook, this idea of a woman arranging her own murder, pricked the curiosity. So although nothing much happens in five hundred pages, people are still going to want to know how it ends. It's a *tease* novel, in that respect.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read or hear somewhere that certain people were predisposed to being murdered?

AMIS

Yes. I can't even remember when the idea or the scratch on the mind occurred. It wasn't even a book I read; it was a book review I read or heard about, or a conversation I listened to in a pub or a tube train. Anyway, all I needed was one sentence, which was the sentence you just outlined. And at that point I was thinking in terms of a very short novel, about the murderer and the murderee and their eventual conjunction. Then the introduction of a third character, Guy, the foil, opened the novel out into a broader kind of society, and then the narrator had his own demands for space to be met. And finally, time and place took over, i.e., London, a modern city at the end of the century, at the end of the millennium. That brought together all kinds of interests and preoccupations. Again, it must be stressed that you don't have your themes tacked up on the wall like a target, or like a dartboard. When people ask: what did you mean to say with this novel? The answer to the question is, of course, the *novel*, all four hundred and seventy pages of it. Not any catchphrase that you could print on a badge or a T-shirt. It's a human failing to reduce things either to a slogan or a personality, but I seem to have laid myself open to this—the personality getting in the way of the novel.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you mean that?

AMIS

Judging by everything from reviews to letters I receive, I find that people take my writing rather personally. It's interesting when you're doing signing sessions with other writers and you look at the queues at each table and you can see definite human types gathering there.

INTERVIEWER

Which type is in your queue?

AMIS

Well, I did one with Roald Dahl and quite predictable human divisions were observable. For him, a lot of children, a lot of parents of children. With Julian Barnes, his queue seemed to be peopled by rather comfortable, professional types. My queue is always full of, you know, wild-eyed sleazebags and people who stare at me very intensely, as if I have some particular message for them. As if I must know that they've been reading me, that this dyad or symbiosis of reader and writer has been so intense that I must somehow know about it.

INTERVIEWER

When did you know you wanted to write, or when did you consider yourself a writer?

AMIS

I might as well do my dad here.

INTERVIEWER

Sure.

AMIS

I'm not at all reluctant to talk about my father, since it's become clearer to me that it is more or less a unique case.

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First of all, it doesn't seem that literary ability is very strongly inherited. As far as I know, my father and I are the only father-and-son team who both have a body of work, or, as my father would put it, who are both "some good." And you know, Auberon Waugh and David Updike may have come up with a novel or two here and there, but not two chunks of work, either in succession or synchronously, as we have. I want to make it clear that it's been nothing but a help to me. Maybe it was more difficult for him, funnily enough; it took me a long time to realize that. I don't know how I'd feel if one of my little boys started to write, but I do know that I feel generally resentful of younger writers.

INTERVIEWER

You do?

AMIS

You're not thrilled to see some blazing talent coming up on your flank. Dislike and resentment of younger writers is something fairly universal among writers, and it may be more annoying, you know, when it's your own son. Also, it seems to me quite natural that I should admire my father's work and that he should have been suspicious and only half-engaged about my work. My father said to me that when a writer of twenty-five puts pen to paper he's saying to the writer of fifty that it's no longer like that, it's like *this*. The older writer, at some point, is going to lose touch with what the contemporary moment feels like, although some writers do do amazing jobs of keeping able to do them, Saul Bellow being a good example. When my father started writing, he was saying to older writers—for instance, Somerset Maugham—it's not like that, it's like this. Of course, there was a reaction. One of the paperback editions of *Lucky Jim* has a quote from Somerset Maugham, which says something like, Today's universities are filling up with the new generation that has emerged since the war. Mr. Amis's observations are so sharp, his ear so acute, that he has caught their manners and mores exactly. That's

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where the quote ends on the book cover, but the original piece goes on: They are scum. They have no respect for values, for culture, et cetera. So a bit of "they are scum" is inevitable in the assessment of the younger writer.

Anyway, to get back to what it was like to start. All people rather like the idea of being a writer or painter at the age of thirteen or fourteen, but only the ones who succeed at it are ever asked when they first got the idea. I have said that I was aware at that age that my father was a writer, but I wasn't sure what kind of books he wrote. For all I knew they could have been westerns or bodice rippers.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't read him?

AMIS

I didn't, no. I was too young really, and I wasn't reading anyone.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever discuss writing with him when you began?

AMIS

Not really. He was brilliantly indolent: he never gave me any encouragement at all. I later realized how valuable and necessary that was. I know one or two writers who've encouraged their children to write and it's a completely hollow promise because, to return to the more or less unique situation of my father and me, literary talent isn't inherited. When a writer-father says to a writer-son—and all sons, all people are writers for a little while—"You can be me, you can be a writer, you can have my life," it's a complicated offer. It's certain to fall flat. So, perhaps out of natural indolence rather than prescience, he never did encourage me at all, and I never appealed for encouragement. What makes you a writer? You develop an extra sense that partly excludes you from experience. When writers experience things, they're not really expe-

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riencing them anything like 100 percent. They're always holding back and wondering what the significance of it is, or wondering how they'd do it on the page. Always this disinterestedness . . . as if it really isn't to do with you, a certain cold impartiality. That faculty, I think, was pretty fully developed in me quite early on. One day, when I was still living at home, my father came into my room and I placed my hands protectively over the piece of paper in my typewriter. I didn't want him to see it. He said, later, that was his first suspicion. But then I did announce that I was writing a novel; I left home, and a year later the novel was done. I left the proofs of it on his desk and went off on holiday. When I came back, *he*'d gone on holiday. But he left a brief, charming note saying he thought it was enjoyable and fun and all that. I think that was the last novel of mine he read all the way through.

INTERVIEWER

That was *The Rachel Papers*?

AMIS

The Rachel Papers, yes. I think he slaved his way to the end of my third novel, *Success*, of which he said, "The beginning and the end worked, but the middle didn't." As for the subsequent books, he read about twenty pages and then gave up. It took a bit of getting used to, this, because you felt it as a son *and* as a fellow writer. There was no sore feeling at all, partly because I was inured, but also because I saw that it was impossible for him to tell white lies as writers tend to do to their friends. I would much rather revise upward my opinion of a friend's book than endanger a friendship. But he was not like that; in that way he was much tougher than I.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel you were carrying the mantle of your father's legacy or competing with that? Was there any intimidation at the beginning, or did you just want to write, and that was it?

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AMIS

I suppose it was nice to know that however bad your first novel was, it probably would have been published out of mercenary curiosity. It was like having a lot of ballast; it was reassuring. The more eminent my father became, the more secure it made me feel. People were very generous to me to begin with, out of a mistaken feeling that it must have been hard for me. The only entry on the deficit side came later, after people who had been generous to me for a while probably expected me to write a couple of novels and then shut up, as writers' sons usually do. There's a feeling that it's a bit bloody much that I've gone on and on and here I still am. "Why were we so nice to him in the beginning?" Interestingly, only recently did I realize that it was much harder for my father than for me. Not *very* hard; I think he was quite pleased, most of the time, that I'm a writer. But much more annoying for him. I was never annoyed. It's natural to admire your elders and to despise your youngsters. That's the way of the world. There was a brief period when my father would snipe at me in print and use me as an example of the incomprehensibility and uninterestingness of modern prose. Thanks for the plug, Dad. But that was just amusing, that was just in character for him. And I sniped back.

INTERVIEWER

I read that when he came across your name as a character in *Money*, he flung the book across the room.

AMIS

I'm almost certain that it was the introduction of a minor character called Martin Amis that caused my father to send the book windmilling through the air. Because I had broken the contract between writer and reader, which says: no messing about; no fooling with the reality level.

I once cornered him and asked him which prose writers he *did* admire—as usual, at dinner, he'd been dismissing great swathes of literature one after the other. He was once asked

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to contribute an article in a series called Sacred Cows. My father said, "What about my doing American literature?" They said, "Well, all right." My father said, "How many words?" They said, "Eight hundred." My father said, "Oh, I don't think I'll need as much space as *that*." When challenged, he said he did like one book by Evelyn Waugh, some books by Anthony Powell and after about another thirty seconds he was reduced to *Dick Francis*. He didn't like Jane Austen, didn't like Dickens, didn't like Fielding, didn't like Lawrence, didn't like Joyce, didn't like any Americans. And was ill-equipped to judge any of the Russians, the French, the South Americans, et cetera. So I began to feel a bit better about him not liking my stuff either.

INTERVIEWER

In good company.

AMIS

Exactly.

INTERVIEWER

Is there someone whose work you read that was pivotal or a turning point?

AMIS

The first literature I read was Jane Austen.

INTERVIEWER

Was it influential?

AMIS

I would say that the writers I like and trust have at the base of their prose something called the English sentence. An awful lot of modern writing seems to me to be a depressed use of language. Once, I called it "vow-of-poverty prose." No, give me the king in his countinghouse. Give me Updike. Anthony Burgess said there are two kinds of writers: A-writers

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and B-writers. A-writers are storytellers, B-writers are users of language. And I tend to be grouped in the Bs. Under Nabokov's prose, under Burgess's prose, under my father's prose—his early rather than his later prose—the English sentence is like a poetic meter. It's a basic rhythm from which the writer is free to glance off in unexpected directions. But the sentence is still there. To be crude, it would be like saying that I don't trust an abstract painter unless I know that he can do hands.

INTERVIEWER

Their experimentations are based on a structure or knowledge . . .

AMIS

They're based on the ability to write a good English sentence. Much modern prose is praised for its terseness, its scrupulous avoidance of curlicue, et cetera. But I don't feel the deeper rhythm there. I don't think these writers are being terse out of choice. I think they are being terse because it's the only way they can write.

INTERVIEWER

Out of limitation.

AMIS

Out of limitation. So if the prose isn't there, then you're reduced to what are merely secondary interests, like story, plot, characterization, psychological insight and form. I get less and less interested in form, although I have the English writer's addiction to it. Form seems to me like decor in a restaurant. Form is easy. You can make shapely novels, everything working like a well-made watch. You can do all these little balancing acts and color schemes—like an American campus novel, meaning, a novel written on campus, rather than about campus. A creative-writing novel. What is important is to write freely and passionately and with all the resources that the language provides. I'm not interested in

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limiting the language to the capabilities—or the accepted, obvious capabilities—of my narrators. I'm not interested in writing a realistically *stupid* novel. Some of my characters have been semiliterate, but I fix it one way or the other so that I can write absolutely flat-out in their voice. Nabokov said something like, I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished man of letters, I talk like an idiot. The first and third propositions are true of everyone. As many writers have shown, supposedly ordinary, inarticulate, uneducated people have mystical and poetical thoughts that just don't quite make it into expression. What could be a better job for a novelist than to do it for them? They say that everyone has a novel in them but it doesn't often get written. If you write that novel *for* them at the highest pitch of your powers, you don't end up with a realistically stupid novel, one that begins, you know, "I get up in de morning."

INTERVIEWER

What would be something really difficult for you to write?

AMIS

I did have the idea of writing—I may yet, when it falls together—a short story narrated by a two year old. But even then I think I would try to fix it so that I could write flat-out. I rather like these impositions of difficulty. In *Other People* I used the localized third person, where everything is seen through the heroine's point of view. She's not only a woman, she's also suffering from an amnesia so total that she doesn't know what a chair is, or a sink, or a spoon. In *Money*, I had a semiliterate alcoholic. In *Time's Arrow*, I have a kind of super-innocent narrator living in a world where time runs backwards. You're always looking for a way to see the world as if you've never seen it before. As if you'd never really got used to living here on this planet. Have you heard of the Martian school of poets?

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INTERVIEWER

No, I haven't.

AMIS

It all goes back to a poem written by Craig Raine called "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." The poem consists of little riddles about what the Martian sees of life on earth. Such as: at night they hide in pairs and watch films about each other with their eyelids shut. Only the young are allowed to suffer openly. Adults go to a punishment room, with water but nothing to eat. They sit and suffer the noises in silence and everyone's pain has a different smell.

INTERVIEWER

Yikes!

AMIS

It's a marvelous poem. As with most schools, the Martian label means everything and nothing, since I think all writers are Martians. They come and say, "You haven't been seeing this place right; it's not like *that*, it's like *this*." Seeing the world anew, as if it were new, is as old as writing. It's what all painters are trying to do, to see what's there, to see it in a way that renews it. It becomes more and more urgent as the planet gets worn flat and forest after forest is slain to print the paper for people's impressions to be scrawled down on. It becomes harder and harder to be original, to see things with an innocent eye. Innocence is much tied up with it. As the planet gets progressively less innocent, you need a more innocent eye to see it.

INTERVIEWER

How would you respond to this quote from Paul Valéry? He says, "Hide your god, men must hide their true gods with great care."

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AMIS

Writers very seldom talk about their gods in the sense Valéry meant, because it's mysterious even to them. They don't know what makes them write; they don't know in any psychoanalytical sense what makes them write. They don't know why, when they come up against a difficulty and then go for a walk, they can come back and the difficulty is solved. They don't know why they plant minor characters early on in a novel who turn up with a specific function later on. When things are going well, you do have the sense that what you're writing is being fed to you in some way. Auden compared writing a poem to cleaning an old piece of slate until the letters appear. The only way you could reveal your god is perhaps under hypnosis. It's sacred and it's secret, even to the writer.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about the influence of other writers or poets? I know one of them is Saul Bellow.

AMIS

I would say they are more *inspirers* than influences. When I am stuck with a sentence that isn't fully born, it isn't yet there, I sometimes think: How would Dickens go at this sentence, how would Bellow or Nabokov go at this sentence? What you hope to emerge with is how *you* would go at that sentence, but you get a little shove in the back by thinking about writers you admire. I was once winding up a telephone conversation with Saul Bellow and he said, "Well you go back to work now," and I said all right, and he said, "Give 'em hell." And it's Dickens saying, "Give 'em hell." Give the reader hell. Stretch the reader.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by stretching the reader? Making things difficult for them?

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AMIS

Yes, I think you throw all modesty and caution aside and say that the reader is you. Inevitably, you are writing the sort of stuff that you would like to read, that would give you the most pleasure to read. Looking back on your work, if it's more than ten years old or five years old, it's usually pretty painful.

INTERVIEWER

You've moved on.

AMIS

You've moved on. But even when you read the page with the half-averted eyes, you'll see something and you'll think, That paragraph is still alive. In the same kind of way you might think about a younger self of yours: Whatever you were up to, you had vigor.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say there's a certain continuity in a writer's body of work, which may zig or zag, but actually follows a sequence over the long term.

AMIS

I think that novels are about the author's voice, and this perhaps is why I haven't got much time for the novel that dutifully apes the voice of the bricklayer or even the etymologist or whatever it might be. What gives the voice its own timbre and its own resonance is what interests me, and that is always there, right from the start. It has to do with what is inimitable about the writer. This tends to get confused with what is parodiable about a writer.

INTERVIEWER

The writer's voice is his style?

AMIS

It's all he's got. It's not the flashy twist, the abrupt climax or the seamless sequence of events that characterizes a writer

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and makes him unique. It's a tone, it's a way of looking at things. It's a rhythm, it's what in poetry is called a sprung rhythm. Instead of having a stress every other beat, it has stress after stress after stress. One's a little worried about having one's logo on every sentence. What's that phrase about a painting consisting entirely of signatures? That obviously is something to be avoided, but it would never inhibit me. I never think, Let's write a piece of prose that is unmistakably mine. Really, it's an internal process, a tuning-fork process. You say the sentence or you write the sentence again and again until the tuning fork is still, until it satisfies you.

INTERVIEWER

Do you say the sentence aloud when you're writing?

AMIS

No, entirely in the mind. Oh, you might have a few stabs at it and then when you read it through, something jars, something . . . the rhythm doesn't feel right, one word is suspect, and you may then recast the sentence entirely, until it's got no elbows left, if you know what I mean, until it looks completely comfortable. What each writer will find comfortable will vary with each writer. Until it suits you, and then you needn't do anything more to it.

INTERVIEWER

Will you go straight through a whole first draft, beginning, middle and end?

AMIS

On the first draft. Then sequence comes into it, and you transfer from what I think of as the more painterly hand-eye medium of longhand. If I showed you a notebook of mine, it would have lots of squiggles and transpositions and lots of light crossings-out so that you can see what the original was. You move from that into the typewritten, which immediately looks more convincing and more immovable. By the way, it's

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all nonsense about how wonderful computers are because you can shift things around. Nothing compares with the fluidity of longhand. You shift things around without shifting them around—in that you merely indicate a possibility while your original thought is still there. The trouble with a computer is that what you come out with has no memory, no provenance, no history—the little cursor, or whatever it's called, that wobbles around the middle of the screen falsely gives you the impression that you're thinking. Even when you're not.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get someone to type the final version?

AMIS

No, no. When I finish a novel, I do think that whether or not I should get a prize for writing the book, I should certainly get a prize for typing it. The Booker Prize is for typing. Even going from second draft to final draft, hardly a page survives without being totally rewritten. You know that the very act of retyping will involve you in thirty or forty little improvements per page. If you don't retype, you are denying that page those improvements.

INTERVIEWER

There's more momentum in the typing stage.

AMIS

Absolutely. It begins to look like a book rather than a collection of doodles.

INTERVIEWER

What's a good day of writing? How many hours, how many pages?

AMIS

Everyone assumes I'm a systematic and nose-to-the-grindstone kind of person. But to me it seems like a part-time job,

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really, in that writing from eleven to one continuously is a very good day's work. Then you can read and play tennis, or snooker. Two hours. I think most writers would be very happy with two hours of concentrated work. Towards the end of a book, as you get more confident, and also decidedly more hysterical about getting this thing away from you, then you can do six or seven hours. But that means you are working on hysterical energy.

I want to clean my desk again (not that it ever is clean); I want this five years' worth of preoccupation off my desk. Because I started writing when I was relatively young, every novel I've written contains everything I know, so that by the time I'm finished I'm completely out of gas. I'm a moron when I finish a novel. It's all in *there* and there's nothing left in *here*.

INTERVIEWER

You said that after *London Fields* you felt a supervoid.

AMIS

I felt like a clinical moron. My IQ was about sixty-five. For weeks I shambled about, unable to do my own shoelaces. Also faintly happy and proud.

INTERVIEWER

In your work, do you feel more strongly affected by visual stimuli or aural stimuli or something else?

AMIS

Through the ear, probably. My mind, like everyone else's mind, is full of jabbering voices. Any phrase that sticks in my mind, I tend to think is resonant and I will use it. Visual stimuli are not so naturally processed by me. For visual description I sort of have to roll my sleeves up.

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INTERVIEWER

You write a fair amount of journalism.

AMIS

Journalism, particularly book reviewing, brings with it another magnitude of difficulty. Fiction writing is basically what I want to do when I get up in the morning. If I haven't done any all day, then I feel dissatisfied. If I wake up knowing that I have some journalism to write, then it's with a heavy tread that I go to the bathroom—without relish, for many and obvious reasons. You're no longer in complete control.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it's a good training ground?

AMIS

I think you have a duty to contribute, to go on contributing to what Gore Vidal calls "book chat." For certain self-interested reasons, you want to keep standards up so that when your next book comes out, it's more likely that people will get the hang of it. I have no admiration for writers who think at a certain point they can wash their hands of book chat. You should be part of the ongoing debate.

INTERVIEWER

How much of your fiction comes from fact?

AMIS

Tom Wolfe wrote that piece—in *Harper's*, was it?—where he said that writers are neglecting the real world—that it's all out there and it's interesting and novelists should be writing about it. He suggested a ratio of 70 percent research, 30 percent inspiration. But the trouble is that the real world probably isn't going to fit into the novel. In a sense, it's better to do the research in your mind. You need detail, you need pegs, but you don't want too much truth, you don't want too much fact. I would reverse the ratio: 30 percent

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research, 70 percent inspiration. Perhaps even 30 percent research is too much. You want a few glimmers from the real world but then you need to run it through your psyche, to reimagine it. Don't transcribe, reimagine. Mere fact has no chance of being formally perfect. It will get in the way, it will be all elbows. This reminds me of something I once said about the nonfiction novel—*In Cold Blood*, *The Executioner's Song* and so on. There is a great deal of artistry in that form. The first couple of hundred pages in *The Executioner's Song*, where Mailer is reimagining the locale and the characters, are wonderfully artistic. But the trouble with the nonfiction fiction is that the facts are there. The murder is there. That's what you're given. And that makes the nonfiction fiction artistically very limited. The larger act of transformation can't take place because you're stymied by the truth.

INTERVIEWER

Can we talk about how your characters develop?

AMIS

I'm very fond of quoting these two remarks. E.M. Forster said he used to line up his characters, as it were, at the starting line of the novel, and say to them, "Right. No larks." Nabokov used to say that his characters cringed as he walked past with his switch, and that he'd seen whole avenues of imagined trees lose their leaves in terror as he approached. I don't think I'm really like that. I think character is destiny within the novel as well as outside the novel . . . that characters you invent will contribute vitally to the kind of novel you're going to write. I feel that if they are alive in your mind, they're going to have ideas of their own and take you places you wouldn't perhaps have gone. In *London Fields*, certainly, the dynamic character in my mind was the girl. Rather as the narrator, Sam, keeps appealing to her to spice up a scene or to give it a bit of form, she was doing that for *me*. She was vigorous enough, and shifty enough, for me to appeal to her to help me out. Fix it, get me to the next stage. I think I

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rather resist the idea of characters being pawns in a formal game. I'm almost daring them to strike out in a way that might surprise me.

INTERVIEWER

So you give them license.

AMIS

A bit of license, yes. But *I'm* the boss. I'm the boss but they're on the team. They're "my people," in the sense that a politician might have his people—his in-depth backup. I'm always willing to hear their ideas, although of course I retain the right of absolute veto; I slap them down but I want to hear what they've got to say.

INTERVIEWER

How will the characters present themselves?

AMIS

I think they have to have a physical hook, a physical plinth of some kind, and they will have a human model. But you don't want to know the model too well. Better to base a character on someone you've known for ten minutes than someone you've known for ten years, because you want them to be plastic, to be malleable.

INTERVIEWER

It seems the source of a lot of what you are talking about is intuition.

AMIS

Well, you become a grizzled old pro, too, in that the craft side of it gets easier and more natural. You know more what you're about, you know more what you don't have to say. You get your characters around town more economically, you get them in and out of places without so much fuss. You learn more about modulation. After a scene dominated by

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dialogue, you don't want much dialogue in the next scene. It becomes kind of rule of thumb. So that if you are going to break that rule, then you have to have a good reason for it. But, otherwise, you trust entirely to instinct. It's all you've got. Writer's block, disintegration of the writer, that's all to do with failing confidence.

INTERVIEWER

How often do you write?

AMIS

Every weekday. I have an office where I work. I leave the house and I'm absent for the average working day. I drive my powerful Audi three fourths of a mile across London to my flat. And there, unless I've got something else I have to do, I will sit down and write fiction for as long as I can. As I said earlier, it never feels remotely like a full day's work, although it can be. A lot of the time seems to be spent making coffee or trolling around, or throwing darts, or playing pinball, or picking your nose, trimming your fingernails, or staring at the ceiling.

You know that foreign correspondent's ruse: in the days when you had your profession on the passport, you put writer; and then when you were in some trouble spot, in order to conceal your identity you simply changed the *r* in *writer* to an *a* and became a *waiter*. I always thought there was a great truth there. Writing is waiting, for me certainly. It wouldn't bother me a bit if I didn't write one word in the morning. I'd just think, you know, not yet. The job seems to be one of making yourself receptive to whatever's on the rise that day. I was quite surprised to read how much dread Father felt as he approached the typewriter in the morning.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, he really sidled up to it.

AMIS

I seldom have that kind of squeamishness. Any smoker will sympathize when I say that after your first cup of coffee

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you have a sobbing, pleading feeling in the lungs as they cry out for their first cigarette of the day, and my desire to write is rather like that. It's rather physical.

INTERVIEWER

The physical activity balances the mental purpose.

AMIS

All under the general heading of a game.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any superstitions about writing?

AMIS

It's amazing—I do sometimes feel tempted by computers until I realize what an amazing pleasure a new Biro is.

INTERVIEWER

A new Biro?

AMIS

A Biro, you know—a ballpoint. The pleasure you get from a new Biro that works. So you have the childish pleasure of paper and pen.

INTERVIEWER

New supplies.

AMIS

New supplies. Superstitions . . . I think someone must have told me at some point that I write a lot better if I'm smoking. I'm sure if I stopped smoking, I would start writing sentences like: "It was bitterly cold," or "It was bakingly hot."

INTERVIEWER

Do you need complete isolation to write or is it more portable than that?

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AMIS

I can write in the midst of—not very conveniently—but I can make progress in the midst of the usual family clamour. But it has to be said, perhaps with some regret, that the first thing that distinguishes a writer is that he is most alive when alone, most fully alive when alone. A tolerance for solitude isn't anywhere near the full description of what really goes on. The most interesting things happen to you when you are alone.

INTERVIEWER

You make yourself laugh or cry . . . ?

AMIS

Yes . . . crazy scientist's laughter comes from the study—the laughter scientists use to signify life created out of a grimy test tube.

INTERVIEWER

Out of a Biro.

AMIS

Yes. A good deal of that. When I worked on my first book at home, my bedroom was above my father's study, and I would often hear, not crazy scientist's laughter, but the sort of laughter where the shoulders are shaking, coming from below. And I continue that tradition. I do find that not only the comic scenes make you laugh but anything that works well. Really, laughter is the successful serendipity of the whole business.

INTERVIEWER

How important is the ego, self-confidence?

AMIS

Novelists have two ways of talking about themselves: one in which they do a very good job of pretending to be reasonably

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modest individuals with fairly realistic opinions of their own powers and not atrociously ungenerous in their assessments of their contemporaries. The second train of thought is that of the inner egomaniac: your immediate contemporaries are just blind worms in a ditch, slithering pointlessly around, getting nowhere. You bestride the whole generation with your formidability. The only thing your contemporaries are doing—even the most eminent of them—is devaluing literary eminence. Basically they're just stinking up the place. You open the book pages and you can't understand why it isn't all about you. Or, indeed, why the whole *paper* isn't all about you. I think without this kind of feeling you couldn't operate at all. The ego has to be roughly this size. I'm not sure it's true, but I was told by a poet friend that even William Golding can come into a literary party at six thirty and do a good imitation of a self-effacing man of letters, but at nine o'clock the whole room may be brought to silence by his cry of "*I'm a genius!*" Just give him a bullhorn. They may have their little smiles and demurrals and seem twinkly and manageable characters but really . . . "Is there anything you'd like to add?" "Yes. *I'm a genius!*" End of interview.

There's also the flip side, of course: terrific vulnerability, crying jags, the seeking of the fetal position after a bad review and all that kind of stuff. One of the perks of being a writer-son of a writer is that I don't think I've had much of that myself—a *huge* self-love. Or maybe I see it clearly because writing has never seemed to me to be an unusual way of making a living or spending your time. Whereas, friends of mine, Julian Barnes, the son of schoolteachers, Ian McEwan, the son of a military man, they must be drunk with power when they sit down at their typewriters, and think: I earn a living because what I think has universal interest, or semiuniversal interest, anyway, enough interest to pay the rent. It must be gratifying in extraordinary ways. It would take a lot of getting over, it seems to me. I've never had that intoxicating pleasure, but perhaps I haven't suffered either. It just seemed to me a very natural way of proceeding with my life, and I

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haven't felt singled out at all. To me, it's all about perceptions, perceptions about life or human nature or the way something looks or the way something sounds. Two or three of them on a page in a notebook, that's what it's really all about. Getting enough of them to enliven every page of a novel, like light. I mean, to call them *felicities* is wrong. You have to have a clumsier formulation, something like droplets of originality, things that are essentially your own, and are you. If I die tomorrow, well, at least my children, who are approaching as we speak, at least they will have a very good idea of what I was like, of what my mind was like, because they will be able to read my books. So maybe there is an immortalizing principle at work even if it's just for your children. Even if they've forgotten you physically, they could never say that they didn't know what their father was like.

—**Francesca Riviere**

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The Singing Cashier

Claire Keegan

Smethers the postman, that greasy fuck with his brown letters. Here he comes in his proud-blue uniform. It's another day, another dense bright space to blacken in. He strides up the street to our porch, slicks his hair back underneath his cap and talks in through the letter-box: "Morning girls!" The voice is treacle sweet, reaching down the hall as if to grope us. He lives next to a distant cousin of ours who owns a fresh-fish caravan up past the Mormon Road, brings us herrings or lemon sole or whiting wrapped in newspaper.

"Yoo-hoo, ladies! Oh, girls!"

The stink of him. The come-and-get-me voice on him. Something's not right. We had fish three times last week, fresh salmon once and this cousin's someone we hardly know, a woman with a van Mam mentioned.

"Yoo-hoo! Oh ladies!"

My sister Cora doesn't budge. She leans her elbow on the corner of the gas cooker and pulls on her morning cigarette, exhaling thick little beams of smoke. She never talks until

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that fag's stubbed out. Behind our kitchen wall, the quick snorts of a knitting machine that wake us up continue. When our neighbours first moved in we thought it was him, snoring, that their headboard was against our wall, but we were wrong. Here we do not know our next-door neighbours. Mam used to talk about neighbours. People playing poker until the small hours, men raising a huge tent together for a marquee on the square, pulling the ropes down tight around the stakes.

Cora takes a last pull, squashes out the butt and tightens the belt of her lilac dressing gown. I watch the prints of her bare feet fade on the lino while she opens the door and lets him in.

"A vision in the mornings," he says, his eyes starting at her feet and travelling up like she's something he could sketch. His lips are shiny with his own spit. "Oh, the versatility of the postal system. The service. Where would you girls be without us?" He hands over the parcel and the electric bill and marches in, plomps his satchel down on the hall stand. A little rub of the hands, a glance round. "Well, Cora, a cup of tea would be sweet."

Rewards for the messenger.

My no-nonsense sister puts up with him. She needs his greasy parcels, I suppose, and cups of tea are cheap enough. She stares into the fridge, inventing breakfast. There's two eggs, a tub of Flora margarine, a wilted head of lettuce, the bright light showing up the emptiness. She shuts the door and plugs the kettle in. It's Wednesday and we're down to the last few tea bags so the cups will be peppered with dust today. Smethers sits down snug in the armchair. Cora turns on the radio, tunes in Jimmy Young, who's giving things away. Then she wriggles a coin out of her purse and hands it over.

"Run down to the shop and get me a box of matches."

"Matches? But there's—"

"Piss off now, there's a love."

She gives me the just-do-it look, so I stomp down to the newsagent's in Breswell Street, a good ten minute walk each

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way, but I come home too soon and notice Smether's belt is notched up tight and Cora's nightdress is inside out, her hands fidget with the fuzz around her slipper. And the smell, like sleep gone sticky, oatmeal boiled over.

Now I'm wise. I take my time. I dawdle to the shops and back, steal a bottle of milk from a blue door's step and sip it all the way into town, small, creamy sips that thin down and get sickening towards the bottom. I buy a box of matches or whatever Cora asks for so we'll never have to talk. Through the jeweler's window I watch ladies trying on rings with big, precious stones, coaxing them up over the knuckles, and the Scottish assistant prising them off again, replacing them in their little velvet beds.

The wind accumulates in this town, cold gusts trapped by the rows of identical, red brick houses, some built in crescents like they're competing for the sunshine and the air. I stand out here among the preschoolers and the café women sharing their gossip and their ashtrays. Other girls my age are in school, wearing scratchy, plaid uniforms and swotting over O levels. I had enough of that and Cora did not seem to mind, said it was up to me. I burned my schoolbooks slowly in a barrel out the yard, pages of algebra, home economics, centuries, continents curling up in flame and diminishing to ash. But now sometimes I miss it 'cos there's nothing else to do, nobody my age, just the soaps and payday and whatever brainwave Cora thinks up in the days before she gets her period.

Going home, I trail my hands along the railings until the railings disappear and pavement gets uneven. Sometimes Smethers leaves the gate open and the dogs get in and cock their legs on the hydrangea. I always wait in the porch and listen, just in case he's still inside. Our porch is littered with warped plaster slabs, dried-out putty tins, things we never bothered to clear out after Dad.

Cora sings. She comes home from work and says, "They're starting to call me the singing cashier down Tesco's. They're

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all saying how nice it is to hear somebody happy."

"And are you?"

"Am I what?" she asks.

"Happy."

"Happy? Happy?" She pats my head, and laughs. "Put the kettle on, ya daft love."

She drinks it black, holds the cup up close to her face and blows out small breaths against the steam. I love her like this. When she sits and thinks up ways to keep us safe from the outside world. Ways to keep this dingy house insulated from the coppers and the gas man, the TV license woman with her sturdy little clipboard.

The photo of our father has fallen off the wall but his frame leans against the skirting board, determined. It's a picture taken at Pembroke dock with a trucker's meaty arm around each shoulder. A lorry-load of construction men packed up for the crossing and the duty-free. His eyes are dark and feisty. Neither one of us has bothered to replace the nail, to hang that bastard back up in our lives. Upstairs, Cora showers, getting ready to go out with the other Tesco girls. She sings a song from her new Tori Amos album, her voice high and brittle as a boy's:

Mother the car is here
Somebody leave a light on
Just in, just in case
I like the dancing. . . .

"Make sure the iron's not too hot!" she shouts down.

In rainy months like these we air our clothes by ironing them. Last time I scorched the backside of her polyester night-dress, leaving a triangular patch of brown. I don't like to think these things might be deliberate. Outside, in a house opposite ours, Japanese lanterns hang like fake moons in the windows. They are pretty shades of blush pink and curd yellow.

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And that's the last good night of sleep we had, because of what it said in the newspapers. Smethers comes early and uses the bell for once. Newspaper but no fish today. His cap is off and I think the distant cousin must be dead. But it's worse than that. *Nightmare on Cromwell Street,* the headline reads. Cora sucks in breath and lights a Rothman off the gas. Slowly, we take it all in. The bodies of young girls under the floorboards. Soil sifted carefully. Atrocities and rape. Plans for an excavation.

The very first thought that comes into my mind is milk. That door was blue. I examine the unsuspicious terrace house in the photo, number twenty-five hung in trellis on the plaster and then I know it's true: I drank Fred West's milk while my sister was shagging the postman.

My father knew him. Fred West came here, ate supper at our house. A brickie on the riverside, his shoes were big and glossy black. A hairy man with a beard and dark eyebrows feeding into one another. Hairy, like you'd have to blow on him to find out where his eyes are, but the papers show him clean-shaven with a reckless look, a savagery made noticeable by truth. I sat up on his lap and together we played against my sister in a game of draughts. I remember his big fingers clasping the pieces, jumping hers, doubling them into kings at the far side of the board and turning back, taking more.

This morning Cora does not tell me to go out. Instead I am to put the kettle on. She leads Smethers down the hall, pushes his back against the wallpaper. I hear her voice but not the words and a few minutes later he's slithering off down the street without a word, moving out of our lives. Finally, he brought something she could not stomach. And those dead girls were my age. It could have been me. It could have been me, and she feels responsible. She sent me out to run fake errands, to roam what must have been the most dangerous street in England so she could shag a man for the sake of a few fishy parcels. Suddenly, I wish Mam was alive. I wish my mother was alive so Cora wouldn't have to mother me, feed me.

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"That's the end of him," she says, gathering up the newspaper again.

"I was tired of fish anyway," I say. "Maybe you ought to shag a butcher next."

She doesn't smile. Perhaps she cannot. She just sits under the window with her ankles tucked in under her backside and turns the pages of the newspaper. Behind her the sun is rising, gathering strength over the houses. In the morning light her hair looks dry and broken at the ends. She looks old today, not tired but less ambitious, like somebody who's quit so she can move on.

I crack two eggs into the frying pan and watch their edges whiten.

"Dad knew him," she says.

"Yeah." I tip the pan so the oil cooks the whites into a shape, throw a couple of bread slices into the fat.

"They built that porch together. Jesus."

"Hard or runny?"

"What?"

"Your egg. Hard or runny?"

"Runny."

She's looking at the photograph of Dad with his trucker friends. For a moment I think she may pick it up but she doesn't. She looks down, keeps reading. She has our father's jaw, a squareness to her face I never noticed until now. Determination is what that jaw says, but her eyes say otherwise. My sister, the singing cashier, looks like she may cry.

"One runny egg," I say sliding the yellow eye and the fried bread onto a chipped plate, a little border of forget-me-nots growing in a blue snarl around its edge.

"Get that down you," I say. "You'll feel better."

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Four Poems by Simon Armitage

The Great Bear

Because of your own natural sense of death,
death's stench in the fur, in the follicles, sweat glands,
death in the roots of the teeth, it's right
that you bury yourself in the hill for months

at a time, sucking the goodness out of your thumb,
like a shipwrecked sailor, sucking the juice from his gloves.
And right that the cubs are born as formless lumps,
licked into shape by a mother's tongue, and right

that you come from the mountain, alive as before
but resurrected, death in life, the sort that awaits us.
And your name is unsaid because of its greatness.
And your eyeball, left in a beehive, gives off sweetness.

Columba

These X rays prove what we probably knew, my lady,
my love. Namely, the heart is a muscle for pumping blood,
but there in the cage of your ribs is a dove, unsparingly
white, turning its head to this wavelength of light.

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The Lynx

All night, a presence outside in the gardens and grounds,
drawn to the house by the stench of a secret.
Keen-eyed, looking in through the walls, a big cat, sensing
irregular breathing, a surge in the nervous system.

At dawn, a walk on the frozen, fibreglass lawn, an inkling
of acetone, pear-drops, methadone linctus.
Beyond the ferns on a cobweb slung between two thorns,
eight beads of urine hardened into eight discolored pearls.

Lyra

The old guitar with its broken neck, bowled over
by the cat, we said. Six tangled strings,
transparent nylon, disconnected, fibre-optic things.
The old guitar that I never went back to collect.

The new guitar with its tensile, cheese-wire steel,
lashed tight from the bridge to the pegs. Thumbscrews.
Cuticles—mother-of-pearl half-moons between the frets.
And my fingertips now are unfeeling, harder than thimbles.

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Graham Nelson

Polonium Elegy

Science was a walk in the woods
Where my neighbour's dad did his Lecturing.
It was a tiny metal cannister, kept
In concentric wells of lead
Which perfectly interlocked.
If you eased it out with tweezers
And hid it behind your hand,
The counter would rasp like a dolphin.
The Sun through an oak-leaf—

For years it all seemed guiltless,
Magical.
Back to astonishing corkscrew tracks
In bubble-chambers, and the blue glow
Of the air around polonium, and a badge
None of whose three arms resembled dead eyes.

On my behalf, though,
The ship's cook of HMS Belfast
Saw the skull. He spent a day ashore
At the Hiroshima of plus three months:
"Like walking on soot," he privately said.
(The birds had ignited in midair, agony
Lost in greater agony.)
The kindest of men, he taught me rather
The wily art of inaccurate chess
(He'd open h4—he was born contrary—
And we always castled opposite sides
So our pawns led brief but exciting lives):
While the grain of an ember, lodged in his lungs,
Waited to halve into fire.

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"Three score and ten," he said cheerily
(One hand superbly frying mushrooms).
Nonsense, said Mum, with an edgy laugh.

But a waxwork cooks for the Belfast now.

Creation is violent, one sky quarried
From another. Like the gold in his ring
My grandfather's death was fused
In the shock wave of an exploding star:
It lodged in the iron cloud of Earth,
In the drifting crust of Africa,
In hospital radium requisitioned
And taken to Clinch River, Tennessee,
To be refined. It was then employed
To kill about eighty thousand people
When the Hiro-Shima-jō Castle vanished
On the four winds: now it ticks away
In hair in marrow in fingernails
Ticks in the walls of a granite coffin
And a heaving Pacific wave, and it ticks
Under pages of lecture notes,
In the ears of steadfast men it ticks,
In Geneva clocks. As a moral lesson,
It diffuses and every 4 months
Half again dies into lead-206,
Mildly toxic and falling on Europe in
Snow. In the husk of dead bees.

Albert, my grandfather (White) v. Polonium (Blue)
1. h4
. . . $^{210}Po \rightarrow {}^{206}Pb + \alpha$
70. Resigns

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Consider the isotope, how it decays;
It toils not, neither does it spin.
It blotches the air blue with alphas.
It hears neither Klaxon nor rumour.
It never suffers a nightmare,
  I forgive it (which is absurd).
It is incontestably beautiful.

It has not long for this world.

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Portfolio

Etchings

Lucian Freud

Lucian Freud, grandson of Sigmund Freud, was born in Berlin in 1922. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Freud's parents perceived the danger for German Jews and moved the family to London. An unruly child, Lucian acted like "a wild animal," according to his father. They sent him to progressive public schools and, afterward, to the East Anglian School of Drawing and Painting, an institution he accidentally burned down one night while smoking. The school was forced to move to Suffolk.

Perhaps because of this inadvertent act of arson, Freud sailed off with the Merchant Navy in 1942. After only three months away, Freud returned to school. Drawn to such classically minded masters as Dürer and Ingres, Freud developed a characteristically flat, linear style, which from the early fifties he gradually transformed into the more painterly, vital, and more sensuously impastoed manner of his famous portraits.

The London art world began to take notice of him during the war: the Lefevre Gallery first showed his work in 1944. Around this time he befriended such figurative painters as Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon, forming a group that would later come to be called The London School. His 1952 portrait of Bacon remains an early triumph. "Since he painted this," Robert Hughes declared, "Lucian Freud has become the greatest living realist painter." Apparently others agreed—the portrait was stolen in 1988 from an exhibition in Germany.

In the public mind Freud is a fetishist of flesh. He lingers on its grotesqueries—ripeness, signs of decay, blue veins beneath the skin, bulges—like a child at once horrified and transfixed, staring through his fingers. By contrast the etchings that follow show Freud's lush regard pared down to line and volume. We're still confronted with his almost prurient attention to physical detail, and yet, without the distraction of color, Freud manages to sharpen the emotional and psychological thrust of each image.

—D.K.

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Portrait of David, 1998

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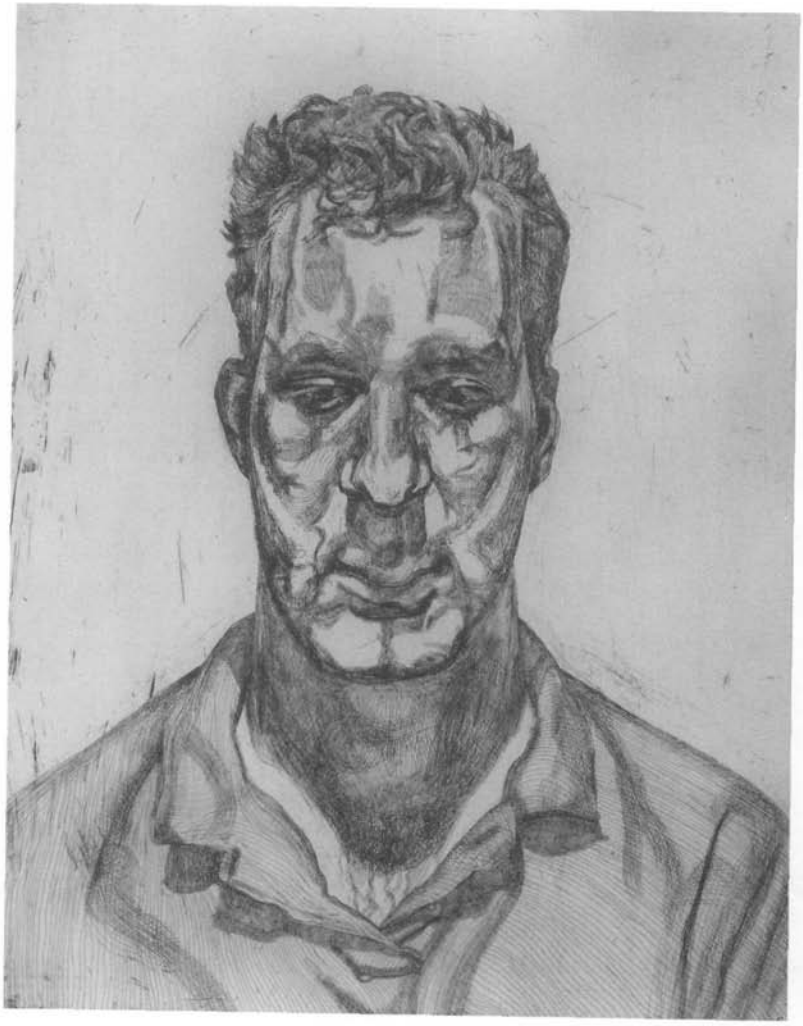

Kai, 1991–1992

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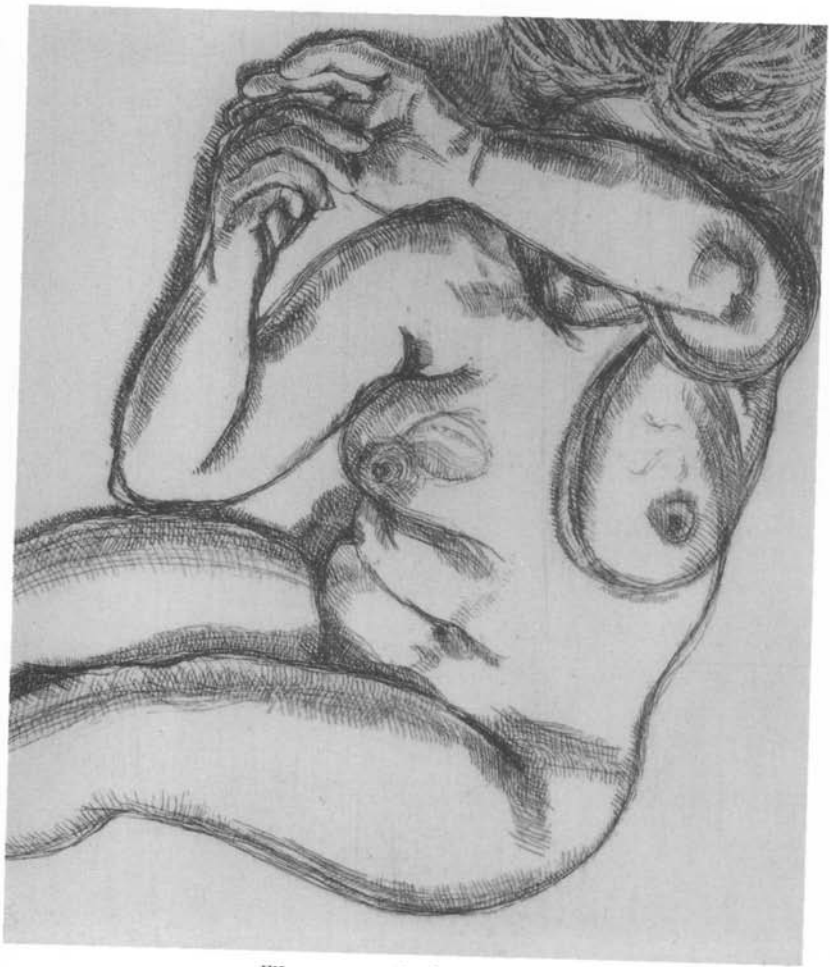

Woman on a Bed, 1991–1992

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Head of a Man, 1992

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Large Head, 1993

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Bella in her Pluto T-shirt, 1995

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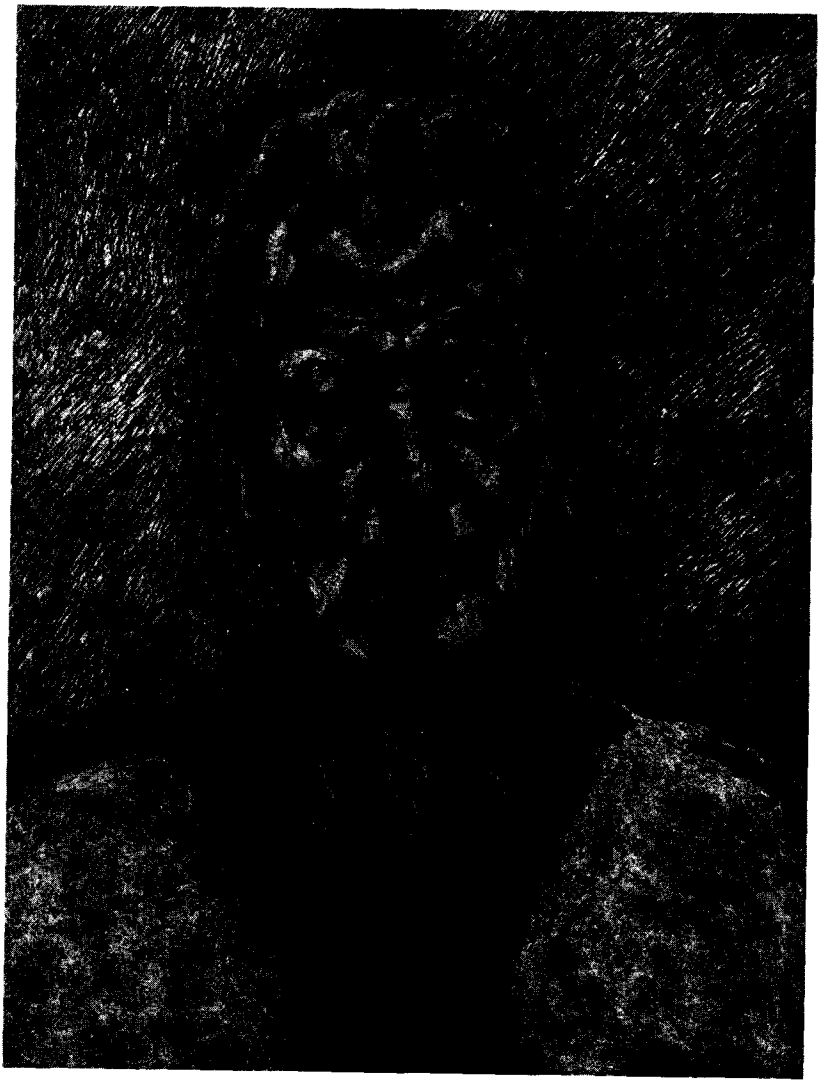

Self-Portrait: Reflection, 1996

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The Man in the Back Row Has a Question V

Julian Barnes	*Cross Channel, Flaubert's Parrot*
John Bayley	*The Red Hat, Leo Tolstoy, In Another Country*
Alain de Botton	*How Proust Can Change Your Life, On Love*
Malcolm Bradbury	*Eating People is Wrong, The History Man*
A.S. Byatt	*Babel Tower, Possession*
Carmen Callil	Cofounder of Virago Press
Penelope Fitzgerald	*The Blue Flower, The Book Shop*
Giles Foden	*The Last King of Scotland*
Paul Johnson	*A History of the American People, The Birth of the Modern, A History of the Jews*
A.L. Kennedy	*The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, Looking for the Possible Dance*
Will Self	*Great Apes, My Idea of Fun*

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Auberon Waugh	*Consider the Lilies, Who Are the Violets Now,* Editor of *Literary Review*
Hugo Williams	*Freelancing: Adventures of a Poet, Dock Leaves*

What marks a piece of literature as British?

The nationality of the writer.

—Julian Barnes

Though there is no scientifically verifiable "essence" of any national literature, there are qualities found in certain British authors that particularly appeal to me and that I look to as my own version of "Britishness"—the passionate clarity of John Donne, the over-erudition of Robert Burton, the playfulness of Laurence Sterne, the Whiggish worldliness of Edward Gibbon, the humanity of Dickens, Hardy's descriptions of autumn, the schoolmistressy good sense of Virginia Woolf and the industrial wastelands viewed through Philip Larkin's thick spectacles.

—Alain de Botton

The question grows harder than ever to answer. In the 1950s, when I started writing, there were both a radical mood (the Angry Young Men, etc.) and a desire to reconstruct a British tradition in the wake of modernist internationalism. Significant lineages were reconstructed (Leavis's *Great Tradition* in the novel, a "classical" tradition in poetry, which found its more modern fulfillments in Hopkins and Hardy). At the same time writers were deeply engrossed in British social experience in a time of large-scale social change during the dawning years of the Welfare State. At this time you could perhaps say that "British" literature was, essentially, anti-modernist (but also anti-romantic), realistic, much concerned with social and moral issues, ironic, comic and skeptical. Yet at the same time a new experimentalism and internationalism

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was already distilling (the influence of Beckett, existentialism, etc.), and that internationalism was reinforced by the waves of late colonial and postcolonial immigration that have so altered postwar British society. Then the strong wartime sense of nationhood began to fade, and the disappearance of empire removed an engrained sense of social and cultural superiority. Now the component elements of Britannic nationhood—the unity of the United Kingdom—have themselves weakened; we are part of Europe on the one hand, we are an uneasy consortium of British nationalities (English, Scots, Welsh, Irish) on the other.

For the British, nationality in literature, certainty of voice, clarity of tradition, inheritance of practice, the English lineage, *is no longer a clear and definable thing. Yet in the* British tradition this is not that novel. British writing was internationalized and cosmopolitanized after the Norman invasion (Chaucer, etc.), again in the adventuring of the Renaissance, again in the intellectual cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, again in the world-wandering era of Romanticism and so on. The tradition in the background, the statues on the shelf, the sequences of the canon, the structures of influence, have constantly shifted, constructing a new order. But elements of the order are there: the language itself, the Graeco-Roman inheritance, the vernacular and humanistic power of Chaucer and Shakespeare, the moralized subjectivity of Wordsworth, the social irony of Austen and the social capaciousness of Dickens, the narrative vigour of Stevenson, the passion of Lawrence, the subtlety of Woolf. Such familiar elements of "English literature" can still be found and heard in British writing, but along with a magic realism out of Marquez, the energies of new Caribbean and Indian voices, the power of Scots, Irish and Welsh voices, and an ever-widening sense of the sources and origins of narrative.

—Malcolm Bradbury

Harder to say now than ever before. What delights me is the range and variety of current British writing. Irony and

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humour are perhaps the constant, even in serious writing, even in work by writers of non-British origin.

—A.S. Byatt

British is very rarely used in book titles these days, in anthologies, collections and so on, and that seems symptomatic. Well, I suppose we had *The Bumper Book of British Battle-axes* recently—i.e., tough old boots like Mrs. Thatcher—but otherwise it's a no-no. Why is that? Search me guv, as a London taxi driver might reply. Maybe we're embarrassed to be British; so what marks a book as British could turn out to be a certain shyness or evasiveness about militantly defining identity politics. But only if you're posh, white and rich. And, oh yes, live in London. It's all to do with what someone once called "the we problem" in British letters—i.e., who is the *we*, this implied community around the edges of a text? Time was, as class-conscious Tony Harrison knew, when literary politics was a case of "uz and them;" now it's all more tricky.

—Giles Foden

None: no such thing as "British literature." English yes, and what marks it is imaginative power and dignity.

—Paul Johnson

British writing doesn't really exist anymore. There's Scottish writing. Irish (published through London houses) writing, English writing and what one might call London writing. All but the last one might be characterized by a certain love of darkness, the surreal, altered states, polarisations and a dry, ironic humour. Or the short answer would be—the spelling.

—A.L. Kennedy

At the risk of sounding facetious from the off: being written in the English language by someone resident in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the political entity which constitutes "Britain"). I myself am an Anglo-

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American (my mother was born in Columbus, Ohio), and view myself—if asked about nationality—as "English" rather than "British" (because I don't subscribe to the British state as constituted). Contemporary Britain understood in this way is a polyglot if not polymorphous entity, there are estimated to be anything up to three-quarters of a million Nigerians in London, and many of them write in English. The most challenging thing about being a writer, in English, in the British Isles now, is that it's more or less meaningless to think of "British" writing.

—Will Self

A certain down-to-earth straightforwardness.

—Auberon Waugh

A sense that writing is a form of entertainment before it is a means of communication. Therefore a sense of fun, brevity, say your little sermon and get off. A deep preference for Anglo-Saxon over the Latin elements in the language. Also, probably, perversity of one kind or another, as part of the desire to amuse. If the dandy and the bohemian are the two archetypes, British writing is surely more dandified than its American counterpart. Ah, a deep affection for the middlebrow, non-academic, cosy and maybe nostalgic.

—Hugo Williams

Are British writers less prudish than others?

Fuck me, no.

—Julian Barnes

I don't think so. There are pockets of prudery in all cultures—including American and British—and acceptance of outspokenness in others. The Dutch are both very moral and capable of extravagantly gross public humour. Being shocking is still a British preoccupation, which gets harder as people get harder to shock.

—A.S. Byatt

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A little: less than Indian, Irish or African writers, probably not less so then European writers, certainly less so than most American writers.

—Carmen Callil

No.

—Paul Johnson

Do you specialise in unknowable generalisations—or is it only that you wish me to do so? I suppose the traditional, middle-class, white, Oxford or Cambridge educated, male writer you seem to have lurking in the back of your mind (doubtless smoking a briar pipe and buffing up his leather elbow pads) would be far *more* prudish (all those layers of sodden flannel to get off; and then—my dear!—the excrescence of genitals). Consequently he struggles to combat such a charge by being more sexually explicit—is that what you imagine? Personally I've no idea.

—Will Self

No, Americans are much dirtier.

—Auberon Waugh

Than Americans maybe, it's something to do with not being so puritan, I'm told. I never could get a deal for my smutty travel book up in the States, but that was because my own permissiveness came bang up against the new correctness I dare say. A prudish writer couldn't be much good could it?

—Hugo Williams

Why is wit so strongly indigenous to British writing?

Because it is our way of being serious.

—Julian Barnes

I'm not sure the English novel, taken as a whole, is particularly witty but I am sure it's full of humour. There's not a

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clear distinction between the two but there is a difference. Jane Austen is both witty (see the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*) and humorous, but her humour goes deeper, is less comprehensive, less definable. Why should it be so funny for instance when Emma's father Mr. Woodhouse—himself a wonderfully humorous portrait—keeps boring his family and the reader with some riddle about "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid." It doesn't sound funny here but in the book it is—very funny—and as with all true humour one can't really say why. Barbara Pym, a contemporary novelist and in a sense a disciple of Jane Austen, is very funny too in this way if you like her novels—some people don't. Humour, like taste, is unaccountable.

P.G. Wodehouse (no relation of Jane Austen's family in *Emma*) comes into a third category: he makes jokes. Sometimes the jokes don't come off: more often they do. And they can also be both witty and humorous, like the man "who looked as if he had been poured into his suit and forgotten to say 'when.'" That is good-natured, like all good humour. Henry James can be much sharper but equally humorous, as when he says that a society lady is "like a creature who perched upon twigs." If he had said "like a bird" it wouldn't have been funny at all. As it is, there is a grotesque element in the idea of an elderly woman twittering away among the branches that is irresistibly comic. And true humour animates a novel more than anything else.

—John Bayley

It's sometimes said that wit and comedy are to British writing what systematic ideas or philosophies are to French, German or Italian writing, and I see truth in this. Humour has been an important part of the structure of British social life. The extraordinary comic inventiveness of Chaucer and Shakespeare is the construction of a vision of a society, in which the brio of individual character is crucial, individual idiosyncrasies are developed, and the social traffic is itself oiled and watered by wit and irony. Language and narrative

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are developed for their ironies and ambiguities, tales are often told for their hardness rather than their romantic release, social scenes observed for their strangeness and contradiction. Comedy and wit are a means by which the British—a complex mixture of races, classes and regional cultures—have found a way to live together and perceive and explore their common idiosyncrasy and their individualistic independence.

—Malcolm Bradbury

Answering this would require an essay. When Voltaire remarked on the mixture of comedy and tragedy in Shakespeare he was describing something already ingrained in the language and the habits of the people. I think it's connected to the British interest in pragmatism and understatement, and is more related to Freud's ideas of the sources of comedy in the hardness of the world than to the polite formalities of French wit, which depends on social codes.

—A.S. Byatt

Wit means self-concealment, meiosis, self-deprecation, a recognition that things are too desperate to be comic but not serious enough to be tragic, a successful attempt to make language (and silence) take charge of the situation, and all these are British habits.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

Because behind this mask of courtly manners, the English like to laugh at each other.

—Paul Johnson

Is it? I know there's a certain kind of febrile, class-based, dramatic irony that passes for wit in some quarters. Oh! And then there's scatology of course—we mustn't forget that pile of shit. But it strikes me that it's only comparatively recently with the opening out of English society, and the influence—in particular—of American humour, that there's been anything even passing for a sense of humour in this benighted country.

—Will Self

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Among British humourists, there is a tendency to take nothing seriously. The French take the role of the writer seriously. Americans, most of whom lack irony, keep humour in its compartment and tend to use it to make a serious point.

—Auberon Waugh

Wit? This dandified thing. Pope. Byron. Beau Brummell. Oscar. It's a little place here and we bump into each other all the time with nothing to say so you better say it differently each time.

—Hugo Williams

Do you think British writers labor under the weight of tradition?

Well, it depends on the writer. But you can equally labor under the weightlessness of a lack of tradition. Having Shakespeare in your tradition at least gives you a sense of proportion, and a realisation that in all probability you won't end up being better than him.

—Julian Barnes

Any grand literary tradition is deeply off-putting for a writer, for to write always demands irreverence towards what has come before. Despite the great number of distinguished British writers, contemporary British writers get away far more lightly than many of their colleagues overseas, because literature itself is not taken seriously at all in this thoroughly anti-intellectual country. This might be cause for lament, but is in fact the saving grace of British writers. Countries that venerate writers quickly cease to produce any good ones; see, for instance, the disaster that has befallen French literature in recent years.

—Alain de Botton

Possibly. The awesome presence of major past figures—for a novelist like myself, Fielding, Sterne, Austen, Dickens,

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Eliot, Hardy, James, Conrad, Lawrence, Forster, Woolf, Joyce—is always a shaping force. Yet these are sufficiently various to open up many options, many fundamentally different ideas of what the novel is. There have been times when the tradition becomes narrowing or oppressive (before the Great War, and again, as I've said, in the 1950s); but much of the time it simply reinforces the joyous variety of writing, while at the same time giving most writers the sense that what we do matters, that we are contributing and adding to some approved and fascinating cultural activity, some basic form of creativity.

—Malcolm Bradbury

No, not really, not any more. I think they can take it or leave it, and I don't think tradition is necessarily to be "labored under." I think it can be, and is for many of us, greatly enriching. I think the French labor much more, at the moment—writing *against* a tradition is a way of laboring under it. I think the fact that American literature has always been thought of as a created national literature has made at least as powerful a burden of tradition, as say, the "condition of England" novel. I do think Shakespeare did irreparable damage to the British theater just by being so comprehensively good, but that's another story.

—A.S. Byatt

No: to me writers from the USA seem much more confined: eternal novels about the Civil War, New York, the South, facing life as a man with attendant rites of passage, etc. Ditto Indian writing: partition, caste, religion. Irish writing: the Troubles and the centuries of battles preceding those, and religion.

—Carmen Callil

I don't think they feel they're laboring under a weight of tradition. It gives them something to reject, and that's valuable in itself.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

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Sadly not. A good number of so-called British writers don't seem to read anything written before 1980 nowadays; whereas writers in many other countries are still in the throes of making a tradition with a living past. The Eliot thing, retrospective alteration of canonical works by new ones, has broken down completely here. All gone.

—Giles Foden

No: tradition is not a weight, but a springboard.

—Paul Johnson

I think the older generation, London-based and London-centered writers may be burdened by too much regard for perceived glory days in the past, but largely we are remarkably free of such things. In Scotland we pride ourselves on our iconoclasm.

—A.L. Kennedy

It depends. Writers who feel themselves to be "British," and who believe in the centrality of the "British" contribution to the Western canon doubtless do feel that way—but that's a function of pomposity and reaction. Anyone who writes in the English language should take on board the relationship of that language to literature, but to feel the "weight" of the tradition is a mistake—why not feel its levity?

—Will Self

Writers are just as competitive here I think as anywhere but maybe they are also competitive with the past. I don't think the tradition is a weight but it is a big example. The example is to break the tradition not labor under it.

—Hugo Williams

Why a flowering of ex-colonial literature?

Freedom; confidence; a new subject matter.

—Julian Barnes

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The idea that ex-colonial literature is flourishing is both an example of inverted racism and a journalistic myth. India has for instance been flourishing for many centuries. More interesting to think about is why this notion that ex-colonial literature *is* flourishing has become so fashionable. The best explanation lies in the deeply provincial attitude of Home Counties literary editors faced with novels with mangoes and butterflies in them.

—Alain de Botton

Why not? What I don't accept is the partial myth that the flowering happened because British writing at the time was in decline, or feeble. We had Golding, Durrell, Burgess, Storey, Murdoch, Lessing, Greene, Waugh, Powell—there were all sorts of different things going on, to which were added all these new and different energies.

—A.S. Byatt

I wish I could hope to live long enough to see whether the ex-colonies, India in particular, will go on speaking English at all. The language may recede, and the literature with it.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

The periphery has become the centre, is always becoming so. (So maybe, re: the previous question, we're dealing with spatial traditions now, rather than temporal ones.) Anyway, let's agree that strangeness and beauty are often now determined by visions thought to be culturally alien. But by whom? And anyway aren't all visions alien today, even those of the blind centre itself? So Polyphemus and Caliban dance together now, and it's good, it's where the energy is in the culture. But get the jive, Man in the Back Row: "ex-colonial" is surely the wrong trousers.

—Giles Foden

We gave them English as the key to unlock the door to the world—and now it no longer has strings attached, they are using it.

—Paul Johnson

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The ex-colonial authors aren't really especially good, it's just that the British (and I use the word advisedly) like to continue their "martial races" policy even after the end of the empire. Thus the clever Indians can be seen to be good novelists, and the Africans surprisingly vibrant—if simple—poets. It's absurdly patronising. Oh, and there's a kind of inverted, reactionary snobbery: "We decadent whites can't write novels anymore in the nineteenth-century tradition—but you quaintly anachronistic ex-colonials can do just fine." It makes me want to hurl.

—Will Self

The situation in the former colonies is fresher and more interesting. British society is exhausted and overexposed.

—Auberon Waugh

Ex-colonial? Who's that, Les Murray? V.S. Naipaul? Derek Walcott? All distinctly autumnal I'd say. If it was ever a trend it may have had something to do with letter writing, writing overseas, the feeling of being left out, fighting back. Also the distances involved allow a period of reflection.

—Hugo Williams

Do you feel that British writers are more attracted to regional voices (Cockney, Scots) than their American counterparts? Why?

No.

—Julian Barnes

The strength of regional cultures and nationhoods. They've always played a key role in the overall British culture, and the changes in the relative power of the region in the weakening nation-states of Europe have invigorated regional cultural activity. That's true above all in Scotland, Ulster and Wales, where writing is shaped by a sense of nationalism and cultural independence, and in some cases by a distinctive language.

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But there are other regional energies and groupings at work, for instance in cities like Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham, and parts of England like East Anglia.

—Malcolm Bradbury

Recent American fiction seems to me to have a strong regional interest, quite apart from its desire to represent different racial and regional communities. Texan American, West Coast American, Chinese American, Black American, often geographically located as well as culturally. We have very good prose coming out of Glasgow, and wonderful poetry coming out of Belfast. But I think the general reader is worried by too much Cockney, Liverpool or Geordie. It's different on the TV where these voices have glamour and muscle. I don't quite know if you mean subject matter or vocabularies. I think both have to be negotiated, but fascinate.

—A.S. Byatt

Well, the Scots are very attracted to their own form of English, so yes to that. I've come across very few novels in Cockney. I don't notice any regional differences stronger than those in the USA, for instance.

—Carmen Callil

Yes, I do, but I think the BBC, always faithful to "the Regions," has had an important part to play.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

No. No one, not even Kipling, did Cockney dialogue effectively; and no one, not even Scott used Scots dialogue effectively. Can't be done.

—Paul Johnson

Writers of English who are not English, or who perceive themselves as apart from the mainstream and stifled by standard English, or imposed English culture, tend to approach their medium with less complacency and arrogance—it is not

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theirs, they must establish a hold over it, genuinely *know* it, as a stranger, a lover and an enemy—they work in an atmosphere of dynamic tension. This can silence writers before they start, but once they're off and writing every word they put on the page can seem like more of a victory, a transgressive and celebratory act in itself.

—A.L. Kennedy

Here, unlike in the USA, anyone who is middle class will talk—more or less—with an accent called *received pronunciation*, like they do on the BBC. What defines you as being working class is having a regional accent—of whatever kind. Therefore, in order to bring the voices of different classes into one's work it's necessary to employ regional accents—preferably phonetically transcribed. Orlrighty guv?

—Will Self

Where the greater attraction exists, it is probably a manifestation of class resentments, where regional accents are welcomed as not being tied to the conventions of an educated haute bourgeoisie.

—Auberon Waugh

Yes they are, aren't they. The regional voices seem far more extreme here, they represent the naive and innocent and they are thought to be funny for some reason. But then you think of the whole hard-boiled tradition and writers like George V. Higgins. What could be more attractive and expressive than that?

—Hugo Williams

Is there a relationship between British and American literature?

Of course, though we should not be misled by sharing a common language. Victor Hugo thought that Zola was an Italian writer badly served by his Swiss translator.

—Julian Barnes

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One might see certain British traits in American literature; for instance, empiricism and realism. But American writing seems far more religious.

—Alain de Botton

In my experience, a strong one. For my own generation, our American contemporaries were as influential on our writing as were other British writers, or the historical tradition. That close relationship (of contact, influence) has continued, and there are a fair number of writers, like Martin Amis, who seem essentially mid-Atlantic in character. On the other hand, there are significant differences. In fiction, one difference is the dominance of the Gothic tradition in America, as contrasted with the power of the social realistic tradition in Britain. Another is, in my view, a different notion of language; Britain still has the traces of a classical literary language, where the American tradition is ostentatiously vernacular. But all these distinctions are far less apparent than they were forty years ago; the crossover now is considerable. British writing is also, increasingly, related to Indian and Caribbean writing, South American writing, and writing in other parts of Europe.

—Malcolm Bradbury

There always has been, from Fenimore Cooper and Scott, through George Eliot and Henry James, Melville and Sir Thomas Browne, to Martin Amis and Saul Bellow. Malcolm Bradbury's thesis that modern British writing is peculiarly invigorated by and derives from recent American writing seems to me to have a limited truth. It applies to men, like Boyd and Amis, but not to almost any women I can think of. (Angela Carter owes more to the Marquis de Sade and the brothers Grimm than to Coover or John Ford, the American one.) I myself owe a lot to James, and admire Toni Morrison inordinately, but think of myself as a European, and then as English, and then as English-speaking. We try to pretend that Sylvia Plath was British, but she wasn't, and hasn't affected British poetry as much as I wish she had—

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American women poets are so much better than English ones. There are writers who have learned from Elizabeth Bishop, who is much loved, by those British who read her.

—A.S. Byatt

Yes, of course—because of the language; it's intertwined, over centuries. The gap grows wider now though.

—Carmen Callil

It is certainly true that British writers like Martin Amis have been influenced by the energy and linguistic verve of the urban American novel; and that the American novel has been championed by important British critics, such as James Wood. Recent British writing, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have influenced American literature very much, unless you count stuff like *The Horse Whisperer*, and that's really just a Hollywood dynamic not a literary one. I'd say it was more a case of old lovers having the occasional clinch rather than a full-blown relationship.

—Giles Foden

The two are a continuum.

—Paul Johnson

Traditionally, Scotland and Ireland have always had a love affair with American literature.

—A.L. Kennedy

A few writers, like Martin Amis, become infatuated with the larger American market and greater sums of money to be earned.

—Auberon Waugh

What is meant by success for a writer in Britain?

Receiving a large enough advance to fund the next book; having all your books still in print; being on airport bookstalls

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and best-seller lists. Decreasingly it means having the respect of your peers; increasingly, the respect—or fleeting attention—of people without the slightest interest in literature.

—Julian Barnes

Today, commercial—as opposed to critical—success is the dominant factor. It's the familiar postmodern phenomenon. Serious literary criteria have disappeared from the court of judgement, culture is whatever people listen to, identify with, or buy; there is little distinction between a marketing and a critical success. There remain many writers for whom writing is not an economic enterprise but a vocation, the book not a commodity but a site of exploration, the poem or the novel not an object for vending but an enquiry, but they find it harder to establish a purely "critical" reputation. As in the USA, publishing has become big corporate business; and there are probably far fewer small or independent presses in Britain. On the other hand, there is great cultural energy and a flourishing publishing scene. The book has survived its McLuhanite crisis; there is a growing readership, both for classics and contemporary work; there is also an explosion of magazine journalism, while television and film have become significant outlets for writers. So creative courses now abound, writing can become a well-paid profession, and authorship and generic writing of all kinds flourish. But, though competent and interesting publication grows, great books of vision or experiment are rarer.

—Malcolm Bradbury

Nowadays, big advances, TV, exhausting tours, too many letters, all of which, however good, cannot be answered. Better not to think about it. I keep writing by telling myself that *this time* I will write a really good book, which means going on believing that I haven't got there yet.

—A.S. Byatt

a) esteem b) money c) sales

—Carmen Callil

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Earning enough to live like a gentleman, or a maiden.

—Paul Johnson

I'm sure there are as many measures of success as there are writers, but given the low sales most "literary" writers can achieve the plaudits are just that. The only success that ever matters for a writer anywhere is sales. If you sell books you have readers—if you have readers you can tell your publisher, your agent, your publicist, the critics, the academics and everyone else to piss off.

—Will Self

Favourable attention in the *Literary Review*.

—Auberon Waugh

Good reviews? Respect of piers peers? Independence? Survival I'd say.

—Hugo Williams

Is there a connection between literature and a sense of nationalism among the countries in the United Kingdom?

Clearly in the case of Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Nationalism in England is less straightforward, more reactive and less likely to express itself through literature.

—Julian Barnes

Fortunately, unlike France, there is very little connection between nationalism and literature. People don't take books seriously enough.

—Alain de Botton

I have the impression that the Scots, the Northern Irish and the Welsh do have both strong literary communities and a strong sense of national literatures. There is also a good sense that the British are mongrels, that we are many subcommunities and jangled voices. What is difficult is being

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English, as everyone else defines him or herself furiously against a stereotypical idea of the (bad, dull, arrogant, uniform etc., etc.) English who are expected to feel vaguely guilty of all the sins of their ancestors. My Irish friends think they are consoling me by saying they think of me primarily as a Yorkshirewoman. They aren't. I am but I am also English, and none of the stereotypes fit me or most of the people I meet.

—A.S. Byatt

Yes, particularly for those who are not English, for obvious reasons.

—Carmen Callil

Paul Muldoon, the Northern Irish poet (or should that be "Irish"?) had something of this in a notion about national identity in literature not being like a "gold standard": it shouldn't be essentialist, immobile. Yet however attractively open and fluid a free-floating exchange mechanism may seem to be, to continue the metaphor, it does throw up the perceived danger of cultural dilution. If, by some miracle, your average white London taxi driver did broach this topic, I'd bet a tenner he'd take you down the immigration, Enoch Powell road. Which is a nasty route to take, especially since the real danger lies not in the loss of one particular tradition to another, but in all traffic losing out as it gets gridlocked by mass media. So specificity itself, paradoxically, becomes the universal touchstone. Or perhaps authenticity is the right word: the point is really that these are namings which only literature can stop becoming damagingly frozen. So yes, there is not just a connection, but a positive defining role.

—Giles Foden

Yes, but a deleterious one.

—Paul Johnson

What d'you want here—a doctoral thesis? For a start I would have to go into the mechanics of these four, separate

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nationalisms; then I would have to survey these four literatures; then I would have to relate them in terms of a definition of "nationalism," which is always moot. The attitude lying behind your question puts me in mind of Saul Steinberg's "A New Yorker's View of the World," so parochial does it seem.

—Will Self

Does the Booker ever get it right?

Yes, in that it is always awarded to a novel of serious intent.

—Julian Barnes

The role of the Booker Prize is to get it wrong every year: in so doing, it generates controversy and something to talk about in the pauses at London literary parties.

—Alain de Botton

Having been a Booker chairman myself, I don't see how it can. One of the joys of the novel is that no two readers agree about the merits of any single one of them. It is the most subjective form in the whole spectrum of art. If *War and Peace* were to be submitted, he can be quite sure that the jury would split fifty-fifty. Half of them would say it was too long, contained too much boring history, was too much about the upper classes . . . no novelist can ever do more than please some of his readers for some of the time, and that is how it should be.

—John Bayley

Meaning does it succeed, as it is supposed to, in selecting the best and most demanding literary novel of the year from Britian, Ireland and former Commonwealth countries? Yes: perhaps about a quarter of the time. The early record (the prize began in 1969) was not impressive; often the right authors were selected, for the wrong books. It improved during the 1980s, when it began to reflect a new energy in British

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books. It's declined again lately, probably reflecting the difficulties contemporary juries seem to have in finding literary-critical consensus, and their tendency to indulge literary fashions. It has helped establish major writers, including Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro and A.S. Byatt. It has also significantly neglected or overlooked others, including Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.

—Malcolm Bradbury

Several good books have won the Booker Prize, and a great many good books have never even been shortlisted. The jury changes every year, which is a good thing, and stops the judgements from being made by any clique or establishment. It is silly to regard the prize as anything but a lottery, a good publicity stunt and a way of causing passionate discussion of literature—which in Britain always includes indignation and whining (the true British vice).

—A.S. Byatt

Yes—see J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* for one—and there are others.

—Carmen Callil

Perhaps competition isn't the right way to judge the arts at all, but it's a very long-established one. Novels are particularly difficult to judge because they're read in solitude, but judged in committee.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

Get what right? Not the gold, anyway, which should be more.

—Giles Foden

No.

—Paul Johnson

The Booker Prize gets it right in the end. Write a great book and you probably won't win it. Write a lousy book five

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or six years later and you almost undoubtedly will. Which doesn't do the books, the writers or the prize much good, but that's life . . .

—A.L. Kennedy

I don't think any award for artistic excellence can ever "get it right"—especially if it's determined by a committee. As one of the "rules" of the Booker Prize is that no book can be advanced for the shortlist unless one of the judges "sincerely believes" it will win the prize, it means that the shortlist is an inevitable dumbing down of the long list, and the winner a further senseless equivocation. I pay no attention.

—Will Self

Practically never.

—Auberon Waugh

I very rarely read novels but I think I would like Kingsley Amis and Anita Brookner if I had a copy.

—Hugo Williams

Whom would you choose as your doubles partner: Martin Amis or Julian Barnes?

Steffi Graf.

—Julian Barnes

I preferred playing singles, when I played at all. Now I go in for solitary, contemplative swimming. I would happily dine with either writer.

—A.S. Byatt

Julian Barnes, but I certainly wouldn't say no to Martin Amis.

—Carmen Callil

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I'm long past playing doubles, but should like to see them play each other.

—Penelope Fitzgerald

Neither, rather not play tennis.

Paul Johnson

I don't play tennis. Remember Montaigne: "Mistrust a man who takes games too seriously—it means he doesn't take life seriously enough."

—Will Self

Julian, of course. He is a serious wine drinker.

—Auberon Waugh

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Tough Tough Toys for Tough Tough Boys

Will Self

Bill saw him about five miles after he had powered past the Dornoch turning. The hitchhiker was walking with one foot in the newly minted road and one on the just born verge. He was wearing some kind of cheap plastic poncho, which didn't really cover the confused pack on his back. There were no road markings, as yet, on this fresh stretch. Two hundred metres before he saw the hitchhiker, Bill had passed one of the road workers holding a lollipop sign with GO written on it in white-out-of-green capitals. The traffic was thick—solid files moving at twenty miles an hour in both directions. The cars were kicking up spray, and from out of the sharp, blue sky, big, widely spaced drops of rain descended.

The hitchhiker was trying simultaneously to turn and give the car drivers a come-hither grin, keep his footing on the uneven surface and shelter himself under his plastic poncho. It was, Bill thought, a pathetic sight. There was that, and

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also an indefinable something about the hitchhiker's bearing—Bill thought later, and then thought that he had thought so at the time, in the precise moment foot slipped from accelerator to brake—which he recognised as being not that of a tourist, but someone going somewhere with a purpose, not unlike Bill himself.

Bill had spent the night at Mrs McRae's bed-and-breakfast, at Bighouse on the northern coast of Caithness. In the blustery evening, after a poorly microwaved pie—there was a chilly nugget in its doughy heart—he had stumped to the public phone, the half bottle of Grouse in his jacket pocket banging against his hip, and called Betty. Once his finger taps had been digitised and resolved into connection, the line sounded dead in Bill's ear. He could recognise the tone of Betty's phone—he knew it that well; but the phone was at the bottom of a galvanised metal dustbin. Then Betty was in the dustbin as well, and he was calling down to her: "Betty? It's me, Bill."

"Bill, where are you?" She sounded interested.

"Bighouse, I'm at Mrs McRae's—"

"—Bill—why are you there, why did you backtrack?"

"I could only get the four o'clock ferry from Stromness, and I wanted to stay between Wick and Tongue . . ." This was an old joke, and Betty didn't laugh. Anyway, he was lying—and she knew it.

"And what's it like between Tongue and Wick?" She owed it to the history of the old joke to sustain the repartee—a little.

"Oh, you know, furry, an odd bit of lint here and there, some sweat, a smear of soap, perhaps later some semen—" he broke off—preposterously there was banging on the door of the phone box. A white face bloomed out of wind and darkness: "Will you be all night? The wind's bitter."

"I've only just got through." He held the receiver out toward the old woman's scarf-wrapped face. She looked at it. Bill thought of Betty on the other end of the line, listening to the gale, participating in this non-conference call.

"The wind's bitter." The old woman reiterated—she would say nothing more.

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Bill jammed himself back inside the phone box, but didn't allow the heavy door to close completely. Pinioned thus, he called down into the dustbin, "Betty, there's an elderly lady here who needs the phone—I'll call back later." He heard her faint valediction and hung up. He hadn't called back later.

In the morning the storm that had hung over Caithness and Orkney for the past week had cleared. The sun was chucking its rays down so hard that they exploded off of all glass and metal. Looking out from the window of the kitchen, where he sat at Melamine dabbing rind in yoke, Bill saw that the aluminium trim around the windows of his car was incandescent. He paid Mrs McRae with wadded Bank of Scotland pound notes—eleven of them. "Will you be back soon Dr Bywater?" she asked.

"Y'know Mrs McRae," he replied, "when I'm next up to Orkney."

"And any idea of when that'll be?" He shrugged his shoulders and held his hands out, palms uppermost, so as to indicate the maximum possible mixture of doubts and commitments.

Bill threw his bag in the boot of the car and picked up the CD interchanger. He inserted the restocked cartridge of CDs into the rectangular aluminium mouth, and listened with satisfaction as the servomotors swallowed it up. He set the interchanger back in its housing and slammed the boot. He walked round to the front of the car and undid the bonnet. He checked the oil, the water and the windscreen reservoir. He checked the turbo cooling-unit pipe that had burst while he was in Orkney, and which he'd welded himself. He did this all quickly and deftly, his blunt fingers feeling the car with unabashed sensuality. Bill was proud of his hands—and his skill with them.

Inside the car he wiped the hands on a rag. He started the engine of the car and listened carefully to the note of the engine. He stashed the rag and inserted the CD control panel into its dash mounting. He dickered with the servos that automatically adjusted the driver's seat. He gave the wind-

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screen a few sweeps of soapy water. He programmed the CD to play randomly. Finally, he lit one of the joints that he'd rolled while he was shitting after breakfast. Exhaling the first blast of smoke made the interior of the car seem like a bizarre Van de Graaff generator, the lights on the fascia sparking through the haze.

Bill reached behind him, pulled up the bottle of Campbeltown twelve-year-old from under the stack of professional journals he kept on the back floor. He glanced about at the roadway, but there was nothing, only the slate roof of Mrs McRae's, with a bank of grass swaying in front of it. Bill took a generous pull on the whiskey, capped the "car bottle" as he jocularly styled it—to himself—and restashed it. He checked his rearview, then planted his foot on the accelerator. The big car shook itself once before plunging along the road. The inertia pressed Bill into the worn leather of the seat, releasing tiny molecules of good smell. He heard the turbocharger kick in with its pleasing whine. John Coltrane's sax burst from the four seventy-watt speakers, the long, flat sheets of sound spooling out like algorithms of emotion.

Bill managed the twenty miles into Thurso in about half an hour, ridiculously good going for this twisting stretch of road, the camber of which constantly surprised with its adversity. But the rain was gone and the visibility good. Bill kept his foot down, feeling the weight of the big saloon slice through the fresh air. The car was so long that if he drove with one arm cradling the headrest of the passenger seat—which he often did—in his peripheral view he could see the back of the car turning, gifting him a peculiar sense of being a human fulcrum.

As he drove Bill looked at the sky and the land. He didn't love Caithness the way he did Orkney. Orkney was like Avalon, a mystical place where beyond the rampart cliffs of Hoy a shoal of green, whalelike islands basked in the azure sea. But this northern coast of Britain was composed of ill-fitting elements: a bit of cliff here, a green field there, a stretch of sand and dunes over there; and over there the golf-ball reactor

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hall of Dounreay, the nuclear power station, waiting for some malevolent god to tee it off into the Pentland Firth. Caithness was infiltrated with a palpable sense of being under-imagined. This was somewhere that nobody much had troubled to conceive of, and the terrain bore the consequences in its unfinished aspect.

It was one of the things Bill loved most about the far north. Professional, middle-class friends down south would have no sense of the geography of these regions. When he told them that he had a cottage in Orkney, they would insistently confuse the islands with the Hebrides. It allowed Bill to feel that in a very important way, once the St Ola ferry pulled out of Scrabster harbour, he was sailing off of the face of the earth.

Thurso. A grey, dour place. The council housing hunched, constrained, barracklike and pushing its closed face into the light of day, as if only too aware that this sunshine was the end of things, and that soon the long, long, windy nights would be back. Bill stopped at the garage, on the rise from where he had the best possible view of Orkney, sixteen miles away to the north. The day was so clear he could make out the crooked finger of the Old Man of Hoy, where it stood proud off the great sea cliffs. There was a light coping of snow on top of the island, which flared in the sunlight. With a wrench in his heart Bill pulled off the forecourt and wheeled right.

Once he had left Thurso, and was accelerating up the long gradient out of the town, Bill settled down to think about the drive. Into this mental act came the awareness that he hadn't, as yet, really relaxed into it. The Bighouse to Thurso stretch had required the wrong kind of concentration; Bill needed to sink into the driving more. He liked to trance out when he was driving, until eventually his proprioception melded with the instrumentation of the car, until he *was* the car. Bill conceived of the car at these times as being properly animate: its engine a heart, its sump a liver, its automated braking system a primitive—but engaging—sentience.

The car supported Bill's body in its skin-coated settee, while he watched the movie of the road.

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Bill thought about the drive and began to make wildly optimistic estimates of the time each stage would take him: two hours to Inverness, an hour and a half on through the Highlands to Perth, then another hour to Glasgow. Maybe even make it in time for lunch. Then on in the late afternoon, down the M72 to Carlisle. Then the M6—which felt as if it were a river, coursing downhill all the way to Birmingham. He might be in time to stop off in Mosely for a balti. Penultimately the M40 in the dead of the night, ghostly tentacles of mist shrouding the road as the big car thrummed through the Midlands towards London. And then finally the raddled city itself; the burble of the exhaust reverberating from the glass facades of the car showrooms and office-equipment suppliers along the Western Avenue.

Placing himself in London at 1 A.M. after seven hundred miles of high-pitched driving, Bill could anticipate with precision the jangled condition of his body, the fraying of his overconcentrated mind. He might—he thought—let himself into Betty's flat, then her bed, then her. Or not. Go to the spieler instead. Get properly canned. Ditch the car. Reel home.

The car was lodged behind a lowering seven-ton dump truck. Mud bulged above its grooved sides, the occasional clod toppled off. They were on the long straight that heads down to Roadside, where the A882 pares off towards Wick. There had been rain more recently here, and long puddles streaked the road; in the sunlight they were like mirror shards, smashed from the brilliant sky. Without thinking, Bill checked the rearview mirror, the side mirror, flicked on the indicator and rammed his foot to the floor. The car yanked forward, the turbocharger cutting in with an audible *gnunngg!* Bill felt the wheels slide and skitter as they fought for purchase on the water, mud and scree strewn about the surface. He was two hundred metres past the truck and travelling at close to ninety before he throttled back and pulled over the left once more.

The first pass was, Bill reflected, the hardest. It represented an existential leap into the unknown. If car and man survived

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they had made their compact for the journey. There were only two ways to do this mammoth run: slowly and philosophically, or *driving*. Bill had opted for the latter. He celebrated by lighting the second of the joints he had rolled at stool. The Upsetter came on the CD, awesome bass noise transforming the doors into pulsing wobble boards, the whole car into a mobile speaker cabinet. Bill grinned to himself and hunkered down still further in his seat.

The car bucketed through the uneven terrain. The landscape was still failing to distinguish itself. From the road a coping of peat bog oozed away into the heart of Caithness, a cakey mush of grasses and black earth. In the distance a single peak raised its white-capped head. It was, Bill considered, a terrain in which a few triceratops and pterodactyls wouldn't have looked altogether out of place. He'd once had an analysand who had a phobia about dinosaurs—not so much their size, or possible rapacity, he could handle that, but the notion of those vast wartinesses of lizard hide. Bill had cured the phobia, sort of. He grinned at himself in the rearview mirror at the memory; he hoped ruefully. But the herpetophobe became correspondingly more erratic in almost every other area of his life. Eventually, psychotic, he ended up being sectioned after ripping the heads off of hundreds of model dinosaurs in a spree through South London toy shops.

Bill didn't psychoanalyse anybody anymore. He could no longer see the virtue in it—or so he told himself. In truth, he found it easier to sign on with agencies and do various psychiatric locums. He could pick and choose his shifts, and he got a variable caseload. Bill had a peculiar affinity for talking down the real crazies; people who might become fork-wielding dervishes. The cops called him a lot nowadays, when they had a berserker in the station and didn't want to get body fluids on their uniforms. Bill wouldn't have said he fully entered into the crazies' mad, mad world—that kind of Laingian stuff had gone the way of noncongenital schizophrenia—but he could fully empathise with these extruded psyches, whose points of view were so vertiginous: one minute on the ceiling, the next on the floor.

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Bill also liked to live a little dangerously. To swing. He used to seduce women—but tired of it, or so he thought. In truth he had simply tired. He still drove fast and hard. Up and down to Orkney five or six times a year. At the croft on Papa Westray he mended walls and fences, even built new outbuildings. He had five longhorns—really as pets. And of course there was drinking. He had Betty, sort of. A relationship based on sex on his part, and sex and anticipation on hers. Bill didn't think about his first wife. Not that he couldn't bear to acknowledge the truths surrounding her—insight was, after all, his profession—but because he really didn't feel that he needed to harp on it any longer. It was the past.

Bill had a thick, leather car coat. Bill had a turbocharged three-litre saloon. He liked single malts and skunk. He liked boats; he had an Orkney long-liner skiff on Papa. He was a blunt-featured man with rough cropped blond hair. Women used to stroke his marbled skin admiringly. He liked to climb mountains—very fast. He'd often done three Munros in a day. He wasn't garrulous, unless very drunk. He liked to elicit information. He was forty this year.

At Latheron, where the North Sea reared up out of the land, and the low cliffs collapsed into its silver-blue beauty, Bill checked his wristwatch—a classic chronometer. It was just shy of eleven. The dash clock said five past, the LCD on the CD control panel winked eleven dead on, and as he looked back from the road, winked 11.01. The Portland Arms at Lybster would be opening; after such a tough morning's driving, there was a good case for a pint—and a short. Bill lazily circled the steering wheel to the left and headed north up the A9.

In the wood-panelled bar lounge Bill was the only customer. The barking of his leather jacket against the vinyl of a banquette summoned an elaborately courteous man in the Highland toff's—or wannabe toff's—uniform of tweed jacket, waistcoat with horn buttons, flannel trousers, brogues. His Vynella shirt absorbed his tartan tie into its own slight pat-

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terning. He sported in addition a ridiculously flamboyant, ginger, handlebar mustache, which cancelled out his weak-featured face as surely as a red bar annuls smoking. Bill didn't recognise the man, and thought that he must be the winter manager; new to Caithness and perhaps not yet aware of how bleak his allotted four months of erratic pint pulling would prove.

"Good morning sir," said the absurdity, "and it is a fine morning isn't it?"

"It is." Bill replied curtly—and then, feeling he had been too curt, "I've had a clear run all the way from Bighouse; not so much as a shower."

"Well, they say the gales will be up again tonight . . ." He picked up a half-pint glass from the draining board beneath the bar and began, idly, yet with skill, to wipe it. Bill walked to the bar, and the absurdity took his cue: "What'll you be having then?" Up close Bill saw brown crap on the man's teeth, and lines of burst blood vessels, like purple crow's feet, around his eyes. Bill sighed—no need to account for his choices with this one: "Is that a Campbelltown there?" He stabbed a finger towards the bottles of malt brooding on the shelves. The absurdity got the bottle down without further ado. "This is the fifteen-year-old?" His tone indicated that this was a request. "A double," said Bill.

Bill had brought yesterday's paper with him from the car, but he didn't bother to open it. He knocked back the whisky, and then chased it with a bottle of Orkney Dark Island. The whisky gouged more warmth into his belly, and the ale filled his head with peat and heather. Really, Bill thought, the two together summed up the far north. He was sitting back on the banquette, his feet propped on a low stool. His back and shoulders were grasped by the thick leather of his jacket. It was an old leather jacket, of forties cut. Bill had had it for years. It reminded him of a jacket he'd once seen Jack Kerouac wearing in a photograph. He liked the red, quilted lining; and he especially liked the label on the inside of the collar that proclaimed: Genuine Leather, Made From A Quarter Of

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A Horse. Bill used to show this to young women, who found it amusing . . . seductive. Bill used to rub saddle soap into the thing, but recently had found he couldn't really be bothered, even though the leather was cracking around the elbows.

While Bill had been drinking, the absurdity was pottering around the vicinity of the bar, but now the pint glass was empty and chonked back on the bar mat, he was nowhere to be seen. Bill pictured him, padding along the chilly corridors of the old granite hotel, like a cut-rate, pocket-sized laird. Impatiently, he rang a small bell—and the ginger mustache appeared instantly, directly in front of him, hoisted by its owner through the cellar hatch like some hairy standard of rebellion. "Sir?" came from behind the whiskers. "The damage?" Bill countered.

"That'll be . . ." He turned to the cash register and played a chord, ". . . four pounds and seventy-eight pence." While Bill fought with his jeans for the cash, the absurdity had produced—from somewhere—a printed card. This he handed to Bill in exchange for the money, saying, "You wouldn't mind, would you, filling out this card. It's a sort of survey we're doing, y'know, marketing and such, trying to find out who our clientele are . . ." he trailed off. Bill looked at the card: "Where did you first hear about us? 1. In the media 2. Personal recommendation 3. As part of a package holiday . . ."

"Of course," he told the deluded hotelier, "but if you don't mind I'll fill it out later and post it, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Not at all, not at all—here's an addressed envelope for you. Make it easier."

As he marched across the car park to the car, Bill scrunched the card and the envelope into a ball and tossed it into a convenient bin. He also abandoned himself to unnecessarily carping laughter—the idea that this isolated spot would ever attract anything much besides passing trade, and the occasional hunting, fishing and drinking crew, was as ridiculous as the ginger mustache.

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Feeling the wind rising at his back impressed further how far Lybster was from anywhere—save the North Sea. Bill took off his jacket and chucked it on the backseat of the car. Then he swung himself into the front. He rammed the key into the ignition, turned it, and the car thrummed and pulsed into life. The CD chirruped—then some John Cage came on. With another negligent circling of his hand, Bill scraped the big saloon around a hundred and eighty degrees, and shot back up on to the A9, this time heading south.

For the next hour, until he saw the hitchhiker, Bill drove hard. There was something about the man in the pub at Lybster, the whole episode in fact, that unsettled him. There was that, and there was the sense that as the car plunged south—switchbacking over spurs, and charging down hillsides—it was taking Bill out of the under-imagined world and into the world that was all too clearly conceived of, fixed in its nature, hammered into banality by mass comprehension.

Not that you'd know it thus far: the road still leaping and twisting every few yards, the gradients often one in ten or better. In mist, or rain—which was almost always—the A9 was simply and superficially dangerous, but shorn of its grey fleece it became almost frolicsome. So Bill thought, chucking the car in and out of the bends.

In rain you had little opportunity to pass even a car, let alone any of the grumbling lorries that laboured up this route to the far north; and there were many of these. It could slow the whole trip if you got caught behind one. Slow it up by as much as a half again. Even in fair conditions the only way to pass their caravans—they tended to travel in naturally occurring clutches, equally spaced—was to get up to about ninety on the straight, then strip-the-steel-willow of the oncoming traffic and the lorries themselves.

It was exhilarating—this headlong plunge down the exposed cranium of Britain. After twenty miles or so Bill had a spectacular view clear across the Moray Firth to the Grampians. The mountains pushed apart land, sea and sky with nonchalant grandeur; their peaks stark white, their flanks hazed

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white and blue and azure. Not that he looked at them, he looked at the driving, snatching shards of scenery in the jagged saccades his eyes made from speedometer to road, to rearview mirror, to wing mirrors and back, over and over, each glance accompanied with a head jerk, as if he were some automated Hasidic Jew, praying as he went.

In a way, Bill was praying. In the concentration on braking and accelerating, and at these speeds essentially toying with life and death—others as well as his own—he finally achieved the dharmic state he had been seeking all morning: an absorption of his own being into the very act of driving that exactly matched his body's absorption into the fabric of the car; a biomechanical union that made eyes windscreens, wheels legs, turbocharger—flight mechanism. Or was it the other way round?

The wands of memories interleaved themselves with the sprigs of scenery, and then the whole hedge of impressions was further shaped and moulded by the music that poured from all four corners, before being flattened by the mantra of impulsion. Last night at the pub—the local doctor, Bohm, drunk—mouthing off about miracle cures for dipsomania—psychedelic drug rituals in West Africa, mystical twaddle—the walk home in the stiff wind, rain so hard it gave his cheeks and forehead little knouts. Now, on the road ahead, a passing opportunity, slow moving old Ford Sierra, ahead of it two lorries and another two cars slightly further on, doing about sixty—a good seven hundred metres to the next bend. A bend beyond that allowed a view of more open road, but what of the hidden stretch? Calculate how much there was. Count: one, two, three seconds. Chance it. Rearview, Bam! Accelerator floored, wheel wrenched, back pressed back into seat. Leather smell. Vague awareness of oceanic chords playing—perhaps Richard Strauss. Indicator popping and tocking. Past the Ford. Past the first lorry. Up to eighty now. Bam! Shift rammed into third. Eighty now, nearing the bouncing butt of the second lorry. Fuuuck! There was a car. Now about a hundred metres off. Moving fast. Deathly fast. Check wing

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mirror. Dance the one step of shock. Slide between the two lorries. Receive a fusillade of flashing and honking. Then—Bam! Back out again. Two hundred metres left of the straight—no view of the next stretch, just green tussocks, grey-green wall, strident, black-and-white cow—keep it in third, will it back up . . . eighty . . . ninety . . . the ton. Fifty metres left—and the second lorry was cleared, evacuated, left behind as surely as a shit in toilet in a motorway service centre. Left behind like the past, like failure, like regret.

Bill felt this marvellous sense of freedom and release as he cheated death and unslipped the surly gravity of the lumpen lorries. He felt it ten times between Borgue and Helmsdale, fifteen between Helmsdale and Brora, then more and more as the road opened up and the hills retreated from the road, leaving it to course and wiggle, rather than twist and turn.

A glimpse of Langwell House, gothic on its promontory, as he zigzagged through Berriedale; a proscenium-framed shot of Dunrobin Castle as he wheeled past its gates and cantered down into the long, spare, main street of Golspie. And still the sun fell down, and still the road glimmered, and still Bill thought—or perhaps only thought he thought—of nothing. Past the Highland Knitwear Centre. How many sweaters had Bill bought in a lifetime of blandishment? Too many perhaps. One purple cable knit at this very shop—for a girl called Allegra. A diminutive blond—too young for Bill. Then twenty-two to his thirty-five. She was all chubby bits, a dinky little love handle, who when stoned on dope became psychotic, fanatically washed her hands in the air like some Method-trained obsessive. Bill had to talk her down every time it happened—and he didn't like taking his work to bed with him.

She gave head like a courtesan—like a goddess of fellation. She pushed down the prepuce with her lips, while her tongue darted round the root of his glans. One of her childlike hands delved in the lips of cloth that sagged open over his crotch, seeking out the root of him, juggling the balls of him. And this as the car coursed along the banks of the Cromarty Firth,

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past the outcropping of cranes and davits at Invergordon. Even at the time Bill had recognised the automotive blow job as a disturbing concomitant to Allegra's manic laving. It was her way of placing him back under her control; he might have the steering wheel—but she was steering him, gnawing the joystick.

It was Allegra's first and last trip to Orkney with Bill. Their relationship didn't so much split up, as shatter some weeks later, when, at a dinner party given by middle-aged friends of Bill's, Allegra, drunk, had screamed, "Why doesn't he tell you all that he *loves* going down on women, but can't stand to have them go down on him!" then thrown her vodka tonic in Bill's face, then attempted to ram the solid after the liquid. A lunge that Bill deflected, so that the crystal shattered on impact against the invitation-encrusted mantlepiece. The friends had plenty to talk about after Allegra and Bill had left.

As the car tick-tocked along the dour street, Bill imagined the grey houses to either side populated with his past courtesans, his myriad lovers. It would be like some Felliniesque dream sequence. No, come to think of it, better to house the past lovers—there had to be at least a hundred of them—in Dunrobin Castle itself. It was so big there would be a room each for the more mature, and convenient dormitories for the young girls. Bill smiled at the thought of this perverse seraglio. But hadn't Fellini been right? Wasn't this the only possible psychic solution to the sense of hideous abandonment that the practise of serial monogamy imparted? To get them all in one place. It wasn't that Bill wanted them all sexually available—quite the reverse. But he wanted them in a context that made what existed between him and them, if not exactly important, at any rate viable. He wanted to feel that it had all mattered, that it wasn't simply animal couplings, mechanistic jerkings, now forgotten, now dust.

Taken with the fantasy, Bill allowed it to occupy him as he pressured the big car through the long avenue of trees that led from Golspie to Loch Fleet. Dunrobin Castle populated by all of his lovers, all of the women he'd ever had sexual relations

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with. The younger ones would handle the bulk of the domestic work. There was Jane, who was a professional cook, she could run the kitchens, with the assistance of Gwen, Polly and Susie. There would be enough women in their twenties to handle all the skivvying, leaving the more mature women free to spend their time in idle conversation and hobby-style activities. Why, come to think of it, there was even a landscape gardener in Bill's poking portfolio; perhaps there was a case for not simply maintaining the grounds of the Castle, but redesigning them?

Even as Bill entertained this notion of a comforting Castle, cracks began to appear in its facade. *All* of his former lovers . . . That meant not just Allegra, coming at him time after time with vitrified daggers, during the fatal attraction of cocktail hour, but other, still more unstable lovers, howling and wafting around halls and stairways. Worse than that, it meant his ex-wife, where would she come to roost? No doubt in an outhouse, from where, on dark nights, the sounds of screamed imprecations could be heard, blown in with the wind, and howling around the drawing room where the others sat sewing, and Bill himself grimaced over another whisky.

And if there was to be room for the ex-wife, there would have to be room for other unsavoury characters as well. Despite himself, Bill urged the conceit to its baleful conclusion. The tarts—there would be room at Dunrobin for the tarts, the brasses, the whores. Bill imagined trying to keep them out—this delegation of tarts. Meeting them at the gates of the Castle and attempting to turn them back. "But you fucked us!" their spokesmadam would abjure him. "We demand room in the Castle!" He would have no choice but to admit them—and then the fragile concord of the seraglio would be shattered. The other lovers might have been prepared to accept sorority as a substitute for monogamy, but the tarts? Never. The tarts would swear and drink. They would smoke crack in the billiard room, and shoot smack in the butler's pantry. They would seduce the younger lovers and outrage the older. On cold nights Bill would find himself desperately

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stuffing his head beneath covers, beneath pillows, trying to shut out the sounds of their wassailing, as they plaited with the moan and screech of the wind.

On the long straight that bounced up the other side of the loch, Bill clocked the signs requesting assistance from the Coastguard in the fight against drug smugglers, IF YOU SEE ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS . . . The image of gracious polygamy faded and was replaced by one of Bill beachcombing, prodding at shells with a piece of driftwood, his jacket collar turned up, its points sharp against his chilled ears. The oiled tip of his makeshift shovel turns up a corner of blue plastic bag. He delves further. Six rectangular blocks, each sealed in blue plastic and heavily bound with gaffer tape are revealed to be neatly buried. Bill smiles and gets out his penknife . . .

Another sign whipped by at the top of the rise, UNMARKED POLICE CARS OPERATING . . . Spoilsports. No seraglio—and now no mother lode of Mama Coca; no white rails for the wheels of the big car to lock on to; no propulsive, cardiac compression to take Bill's heart into closer harmony with the rev counter . . . He hunkered down once more, gripped the steering wheel tighter, concentrated on the metallic rasp of John Lee Hooker's guitar, which ripped up the interior of the car. Then came the roadworks. Then came the hitchhiker.

Bill braked and looked for somewhere to pull over. About fifty metres further on there was a break in the earth-soft verge where blue-grey gravel puddled on to the roadway. Bill aimed for it, indicated and then crunched the car to a halt. In the rearview mirror he could see the hitchhiker running towards the car, his pack bouncing, his poncho flapping, an expression of gap-toothed desperation on his face, as if he were absolutely certain that this offer of a lift were a taunt or a hoax, and that as soon as he was level with the car Bill would drive off guffawing.

The hitchhiker yanked the car door open, and the fresh air and moisture and sunlight streamed in. "Thanks mate—" he was clearly going to converse "—Get in!" Bill snapped,

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"I can't stop here for long." He gestured at the roadway, where the cars were having to pull over the centre line in order to pass. The hitchhiker threw himself into the front passenger seat of the car, his pack still on. Bill glanced in the rearview, indicated, lazily circled the wheel to the right and rejoined the traffic.

For some seconds neither said anything. Bill pretended to concentrate on the driving and observed his captive out of the corner of his eye. The hitchhiker sat, his face almost against the windscreen, the backpack—which Bill now saw had a tent bag and roll of sleeping bag tied to it—was like a whole, upper-body splint, designed so as to force its wearer into closer contemplation of the road. A Futurist's corset. "I'll stop as soon as I can," Bill said, "and we can put that in the back." The hitchhiker said, "Thanks very much."

He was—Bill guessed—in his late twenties or early thirties. His accent was Caithness, the sharp elements of a Scottish brogue, softened and eroded by a glacial covering of Scandinavian syllables. His black, collar-length hair was roughly cut. He wore the yellow nylon poncho, and under it a never-fashionable, fake-sheepskin-lined denim jacket. From behind the distempered non-wool poked the collar of a tartan shirt. The hitchhiker's breath smelt foully of stale whisky. His eyes were bivouacked in purple bags, secured by purple veins. He was unshaven. His teeth were furred. He had an impressive infection in the dimple of his strong chin—he wasn't bad looking. "Are you going far?" he asked. "All the way," Bill smiled, "to London that is." The hitchhiker grinned, and attempted—insofar as the pack allowed him—to settle more securely in his seat. It was the last question he asked Bill for the whole journey.

They were across the Cromarty Firth causeway and on the Black Isle before Bill found a proper lay-by to stop in. They both got out of the car, and Bill rearranged the things on the back seat so that the hitchhiker could stash his pack. They were rolling again in a couple of minutes. Bill pushed the car up to seventy and then idled there, the index finger and

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thumb of his right hand holding the lower edge of the steering wheel as if it were some delicate, surgical instrument. The rain ceased and the roadway shone once more. The muted CD played the current single by a hip guitar band. The hitchhiker drummed chipped, dirty nails on frayed, dirty denim.

"So," said Bill after a while, "where are you headed?"

"I'm going all the way too," he hunched round to face Bill, as if they were casual drinkers striking up a conversation at the bar of the car's dashboard. "I stop in Poole, Dorset, but I've a mate in Glasgow I want to see for tonight."

"Well, I can drop you outside Glasgow, I'm heading straight on through and south."

"That'll be grand." The hitchhiker smiled at Bill, gifting him a sight of peaks of plaque. It was a smile that should be given at the conclusion of such a trip—not the beginning. "Nice car," the hitchhiker said, still smiling.

"Yeah," Bill drawled, "it motors. So, where're you from?"

"Thurso."

"And what's the purpose of the trip?"

"I'm studying down in Poole, got myself on a computer course like. I had a reading week so I thought I'd get up to see my kiddies—"

"They're in Thurso?"

"Aye, right enough."

The old 'fluence was still there, Bill thought. A couple of miles, a few questions insinuated in the right, vulnerable places, and like some cunning piece of Chinese marquetry—a box with hidden compartments subtly palped—the hitchhiker's psyche would begin to open out, to exfoliate. They swung over the ridge of Isle, and the car caromed on down onto the dual carriageway. They emerged from a forest of scattered conifers and there, hunkered around its cathedral spire, Inverness gleamed. "Inverness," said the hitchhiker. He even states the obvious! Bill snidely exulted.

"Did you come from Thurso this morning?"

"I did. After a bit of a session—if you catch my meaning."

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"Some mates saw you off then?"

"They couldna' exactly see me off—they were all pished malarkey. Five of the fuckers, all inna heap. So I tiptoed out. Got a lift right away across to Latheron, then down to Dornoch. Then I was walking in the bloody rain for four miles before you stopped for me—"

"—It was difficult to stop. The roadworks—"

"—Aye, right enough."

"You've got a tent and stuff there?"

"In case I get caught short like—and have to spend the night on the road. I had to do that on the way up. I slept by the side of the road near Aviemore."

"Wasn't that a drag?"

The hitchhiker snorted, "I'll say. Come five in the morning the rain starts coming down holus-bolus, and then a fucking cow starts giving a horn to ma' flysheet. I was back on the road before dawn, with my thumb stuck up like a fucking icicle . . ." He trailed off and gave Bill another grimy grin. His stubble was blue. Bill was emboldened to ask, "So, you're fond of a drink then?" The hitchhiker pressed the ball of his thumb into one eye socket, the middle joint of his index finger into the other. He kneaded and scrunched his features, answering from within this pained massage, "Oh well, I suppose . . . perhaps more than I should be. I dunno."

Bill wry-smiled. He looked for a turning on the left—the carriageway was still dual—when he saw a forestry track, he dabbed the brakes, indicated, lazily circled the wheel and pulled in. "Slash," he said. They both got out. Bill left the car running. They both pissed into the edge of the woodland. Through steam and sun Bill assayed his companion's urine. Very dark. Perhaps even blood dark. There was a touch of jaundice in the hitchhiker's complexion as well. Maybe kidney infection, Bill thought, maybe worse. Not that this would be necessarily pathological in any way. They drank like that in Thurso—as they did in Orkney.

Bill knew ten men under thirty-five on Papa alone who had stomach ulcers. In Dr Bohm's surgery there were forty-

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odd leaflets urging parents to check their children for symptoms of drug abuse. Absurd, when about the only drugs available on the island were compounds for ensuring the evacuation of bovine afterbirth. Bohm also had one small, tattered sticker near the surgery door, which proclaimed "Drinkwise Scotland," and gave a help-line number. This lad was, Bill reflected, quite possibly addicted to alcohol, without necessarily being an alcoholic.

When they were back in the car Bill reached back behind the young man's seat and pulled up the car bottle. It was half-full. "Will you have a dram?" He sloshed the contents about; they were light and pellucid—as the stream of urine ought to have been. Bill appreciated the exact battle between metabolic need and social restraint that danced with the young man's features. He broke the spell by uncorking the bottle and taking a generous swig himself. Then he passed the bottle to the young man who was saying, "Sure . . . Yeah . . . Right."

The whisky went off like an anti-personality mine somewhere in the rubble-strewn terrain of Bill's forebrain. He flicked the shift into reverse and crunched backward. He took the bottle from the young man and restashed it. He hugged the headrest and sighted down the road. Nothing. He banged the accelerator and the car twisted backwards, pivoting at the hips, rested on its rubber haunches for a second while Bill flicked the shift into drive, then shook itself and plunged back up the long hill. Twenty, thirty, forty . . . the turbocharger *gnunng*ed! in . . . fifty-five, seventy, eighty . . . to either side the rows of orderly conifers strobed back; the gleaming road ahead twanged like a rubber band; the sky shouted, "Wind!"; the reggae music welled like beating blood "No-no-no-oo! You don' love me an' I know now—"; Bill was feeling no pain. The young man was shouting something, Bill hit OFF.

"—arked cars—"

"—What was that you said?" Bill's voice was precise and dead level in the instantaneously null environment of the car. It sounded like an aggressive threat.

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"Y'know the police, man . . . the pigs . . . They have unmarked cars on this road."

"I know." Bill poked at the speedometer. "Anyway I'm only doing eighty-five, they won't pull you til you get within a whisker of ninety, d'you smoke?" Without so much as twisting the thread of conversation, Bill had filched another joint from his inside pocket.

The whisky and the skunk opened the young man up. He skewed himself further in his seat, imposing more intimacy, and Bill began to feed him questions. His name was Mark. His father had been a marine engineer. Much older than the mother. The father was Viennese—Jewish. A wartime refugee, he designed some of the early SONAR systems. The mother died of cancer when Mark was eight, the father four years later. The father had had money but the estate was mismanaged by uncaring trustees. Mark and his brother ended up in children's homes. They were separated. Mark left school, got a job with a carrier's. Married, had two children and . . .

"—fucked up I s'pose right enough."

"What's that?"

"With the kiddies like. Fucked up. Y'know I was young—didn't know what I wanted. Still don't I s'pose." He gifted Bill another smile that had once—no doubt—been charming. Bill had been waiting for this; this descent into the cellar of Mark's mind. The kids—his relationship with his kids—would have to be the trapdoor, the way down. Bill had pegged Mark as a bolter almost immediately. There was an aspect of bruised dejection about the young man, which suggested someone who was willing to wound but afraid to strike. Someone who would say the unsayable and then attempt retraction. Someone whose capacity for self-love would only ever be manifested through attitudinising and narcissism.

Bill thought that he quite hated Mark already. He hated the young man's willingness to be drawn out. His self-absorption. His tiresome lack of cool—he had told Bill four times while they smoked the joint how good the dope was in Poole, and how adept he and his pals were at obtaining it. Bill

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resolved to pump Mark for all he was worth. To gut the man's past, quarter his present and draw a bead on his future. It was a game Bill had often played before—trying to find out as much as he could about someone he encountered by chance. Find out as much as he could, and—this was crucial—not give away anything about himself. Once the mark began asking questions himself the game was over.

"It's difficult bringing up kids—"

"—Specially with no dosh. Specially with no space y'know. Space to think. I always thought there was more to me than just a driver. My father was a brilliant man. I couldn't find myself. Couldn't in Thurso—nothing there. And my wife . . . she didn't, sort of, get it . . ."

"Understand?"

"Right."

"And it's better down in Poole? Did you go there directly?"

"Well, no. I bummed around the country, sort of, for a while. I mean, I set off aiming for Glastonbury that year—and then just sort of kept on. Got, well, ended *up* in Poole because of the Social—"

"—Easier to claim?"

"Aye."

They were well into the mountains and the clouds had come down. To the right the Monadhliaths, to the left the Grampians. The valley was a mile or so wide. Beyond the rough summer pasture the mountains did what they did best: mounting. Either the furred flanks of forestry, or the abrasive architecture of scree. Up and up, until the indefinite, thrusting peaks made contact with the cloudy massifs lowered from above. Bill noted that the car was almost out of petrol. They would have to run into Aviemore.

"I'm going to run into Aviemore," he said to Mark, who was humming along with the music, "but we won't be stopping, we'll just grab some sandwiches and head on—have you eaten?" The young man was hitching. It was plain that he'd spent all of his money on booze the night before. This was Bill's opportunity to do him a real turn. Feed him up.

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"Nah, really . . . nah . . . I'm all right." The suitable case for charity suitably hung his face. Bill said nothing—he was looking for signs. Eventually one ran along the road towards them—it was a mile to the turn. The sign—as did most in this part of the Highlands—showed a turnoff diverting from the main road, lancing a boil destination and then rejoining it. Bill mused on how like life this was; the temporary diversions that you attempted to make, which were always cut off, subsumed once more to the ruthlessly linear, the deathly progression. Bill thought of sharing this observation with Mark, but then thought better of it. Then he did anyway.

Mark pondered for a while, then factored himself in: "Yeah, I feel that my whole life's been like that up til now. I haven't been doing what I should—I've been marking time."

"Neat."

"What?"

"Neat."

"What?"

"Nothing." They sat silent as Bill piloted the car through the outskirts of Aviemore. The place was still tatty despite the money that had recently been poured in. Most of the buildings were chalet-style, with steeply pitched roofs running almost to the ground. But the materials were synthetic; concrete and aluminium; asbestos and Perspex. Every surface seemed to be buckling; every edge rucking up. "Shit hole," Bill said.

Seeing a biggish Texaco station, set back off the road, Bill lazily circled the steering wheel to the left and the car oozed on to the forecourt. He pulled up to the pumps, was out of the door with the petrol-cap key in one hand and a tenner in the other, before Mark had a chance to plan his arrival. The air here was a sharp embrace. Bill still vibrated with the road. The outside world was warped. It felt like leaving a cinema after a matinee, and coming out into the inappropriately bright afternoon. "I'll fill the tank—could you go and get us three or four of those crappy plastic sandwiches they do—tuna, chicken, whatever . . . And some drinks, Coke, Irn Bru—yeah? And some fags. Regal blue. Okay?"

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Mark slouched off to the shop. If I give him enough things, Bill thought, he'll have to ask me about myself. He'll have to evince some curiosity about his benefactor. Bill wanted this. He didn't like his dislike of the young man, didn't like the way it was curdling in his gut—curdling it with still more bilious, watery gripes. If Mark would only ask him about himself, the inquisition could be called off. They could chat normally, instead of this ceaseless interrogative chatter. Eventually silence would fall—not companionable, but not alienated either. In due course he would drop the young man off, on a slip road, about ten miles outside Glasgow. They would part and forget.

Spasmodically, Bill clutched the handle of the pump, until the attendant hit the flashing button on his console and the petrol began to glug and course. Perhaps Mark had done a flit, a new bolt, Bill couldn't make him out in the shop. It wouldn't be a bad score for the lad; a bit of whisky, some dope, a tenner, a ride, why not duck out now while he was ahead? Then Mark appeared from the back of the shop, where the customer toilets were, and Bill allowed himself the luxury of feeling a little guilty, imagining that he had misjudged human character.

Back in the car Mark struggled with his seatbelt while they rolled back out onto the road. "They'd no tuna, but I got a bacon one and chicken with corn . . . and . . . smoked ham." He displayed the plastic-packed chocks of sandwich to Bill, as if he were about to be asked to perform some visio-spatial test with them.

"Have you got a Coke?"

"Aye." Mark passed it to Bill, but not before thoughtfully opening it. Bill drank the Coke and drummed the wheel. They puttered between mutant chalet-style blocks of tourist flats, then past a shopping parade, then out into the country again. Bill didn't say anything until they were heading south on the A9 once more. Then he sighed, cranked the big car up to eighty-five, overtook a convoy of Finnish camper-vans that were struggling up a long gradient and said, "So, did you see much of the kids when you were up this time?"

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"It was . . . " Mark was struggling with a recalcitrant piece of ham; gristle in a tug-of-war between bread lips and flesh lips. ". . . It was . . . " Bill decided to ignore the appetitive recovery, ". . . difficult y'know. I've nowhere to take them, and I'm not happy hanging around her place—not that she's keen or anything. I took them to the park a couple of times . . . and for tea." Either the clouds were descending, or the road was still rising, because turbulent clumps of vapour were falling down from the dark passes and scudding a couple of hundred feet above the road. Bill put on the headlights, full beam. "Was it a long time since you were up before then?"

"I hadn't been back before." Mark let this fall from between chomping jaws, then grimaced, "Ach! It's not like me."

"What's that?"

"To be saying so much."

"Really?"

"Ach ye-es, well, I dunno . . . I was always a bit of a tearaway y'know—"

"—I gathered."

"Nothing grievous, but this and that, y'know telling a few tall ones to the social, doing a few chequebook and card jobs. So I was always good at . . . y'know . . . "

Y'know, y'know, y'know? What could this young man imagine about Bill? That he knew everything? That such a nonce word had become Mark's asinine catchphrase begged the very question the answer to which it assumed. The more *y'knows* filled the car, the more Bill felt certain that he did know—and bridled from the truth: ". . . Lying?"

"Yeah, I s'pose. There's a way of doing it—" he grinned "—a technique almost. It's like job interviews—"

"—Job interviews?"

"Yeah. If you don't want the job, you tend to do well in the interview. It's the same with lying. People always make the mistake of trying to make someone believe what they're saying—but that's not the way. You've got to not care whether they believe—and they will. I'm pretty good at it, if I say so myself. Not that I lie now though," he was gabbling, "I don't have to anymore—don't need to . . ."

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But he had lost Bill, who was no longer listening to the content of what Mark said—only its form. Bill was listening to the emotional shapes that Mark was making. In the rising and falling of tone, the bunching and stretching of rhythm, he was able to discern the architecture of Mark's past history: the outhouses of unfeeling and evasion; the vestibules of need and recrimination; the garages of wounding and abuse. All of it comprehensively planned together, so as to form a compound of institutionalisation and neglect. Bill honed his ears, concentrating on this shading-in of a sad blueprint. The young man's actual *pride* in his mendacity—that would have to be one part bravado, one part a lie and one part the truth. Nasty little cocktail. Nasty little dilemma for the two of us, imprisoned in a car, speeding through a mountain pass. Bill hunkered down more against the comfortable, padded extrusion of the door, letting his weight rest on the inside handle. He scanned Mark out of the corners of his eyes; a series of quick, penetrating glances, as ever interleaved with shards of scenery, fragments of road. He really was rough. The fingers nicked and burnt; pus-ridden here—browned there; the knuckles fulsomely scabbed. He might not be altogether *compos mentis*—this hitchhiker, awarded to Bill by the journey, like an idiotic prize—but that made him all the more potentially dangerous.

"—potential for people, like me, to do all sorts of things . . ." Mark had veered on to the subject of the Internet. It appeared to verge most of his discourse. ". . . don't you think?"

"Oh definitely," Bill replied, surfacing, and used the hiatus to ask for the chicken sandwich, before getting back down to the drive, getting back down to the questioning.

Past the turning for Kingussie, past the A86, forking away to the west coast and Fort William, the big car bucketed on along the darkening road, as the autumn afternoon curled about the mountains. Bill kept the speed up—because he had no speed. The last of the Dexedrine had been used for the drive north. It was unwise for him to blag anymore for

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a while. More than unwise—fucking foolhardy. So, on this mammoth drive Bill would have to depend on caffeine and ephedrine pills. Hideous shit he hadn't scoffed since revising for school exams. Feeling himself flag, and sopor welling up from the road, Bill scrabbled in the pocket of his jacket, located a couple of the bitter little things, washed them down with a mouthful of flat Coke. Mark was talking about what served him as a love life.

"If you've had bad experiences it affects you. I dunno—maybe I'm not so good on the trust end of things . . ." Preposterously, Bill realised he was referring to his capacity for trust—not his trustworthiness. ". . . So I keep my distance. Jennifer" (that was the new girlfriend) "did move in for a bit, but I felt crowded. We couldn't see eye to eye. The place was too small. She wouldn't give me my space—like my wife. Always crowding me, getting on my case about . . . stuff. We're still seeing each other though . . . though it's not quite so full-on . . ." Bill thought he could probably decipher this completely now. Mark was abusive—like many of the abused. Back in Thurso was a wife who had cowered when one of those barked hand-battens was raised; and in Poole it had been the same. Bill heard hysterical flutings of heterosexual discord in his inner ear: Mark and the nameless women, pleadings and beratings like vile duets. The hitchhiker harped on about the harpies.

By now they were coming down off the mountains. The land turned a greener, tawnier hue by the mile. The isolated, shuttered lodges were being replaced by scattered habitations, farms carved out from the heathery hillsides. But as if to taunt the occupants of the car, who were, after all, coming in from a kind of cold, the rain now recommenced. Bill flicked the stalk, the wipers did their thing intermittently, then steadily, then rapidly. And by the time they were passing the turning for Pitlochry the land, the road and the sky had been boiled up into a vaporous stock. Turner, Bill thought, would have painted this greying haze, had he been alive to suck the butt-end of the twentieth century.

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Mark was talking about the Internet again. About how a friend of his—an acquaintance, really—had set up a small service-provider and software technical-support company. The friend was letting Mark spend time on his equipment, learn his way around it. The friendship, Bill surmised, was actually just as virtual as a Windows window. Mark was there under sufferance—if there at all. But Bill wasn't really thinking about this, he was remembering a woman he'd bedded in Pitlochry. A wanna-be thesp, up for the summer theatre festival. Bill had motored through and caught her in an execrable production of *Lady Windemere's Fan*. Funny that—a bad production of Wilde. Funny how bad direction, bad acting, bad sets and costumes were the dramatic equivalent of monkeying with the controls on a television, so that the picture became over-contrasted or too dark. In this case the effect of the monkeying was to produce leaden vulgarity, rather than frothy and sophisticated farce.

After desultory applause he had cornered her in her cubby-hole dressing room. The smell of silk, satin, crinoline and powder was sharp, overpowering. She'd giggled as he pushed up her skirts.

". . . We didn't realise he had a stash in there. We just went in to get these tapes back, but we found it in his room, so we took it. It turned out it was his whole stash. He paid us upwards of two hundred to get it back—a decent score." Mark was, Bill realised, talking about another rip-off. He'd slid from contemplating that mundane world of electronic encoding, to the airily fascinating world of Poole bedsits. "So," Bill lit a Blue Regal with the lighter he now held, permanently crushed, between palm and steering wheel, "did you take any of the smack?"

"God no! I wouldn't do that! Bit of puff fine—bit of whizz when it's about, but I don't want to fuck up—I've seen what that shit can do to people."

Bill inwardly grinned. What more could a heroin addiction have done to this young man? Make him leave another family? Make him lie more than he had already? Make him a more

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self-satisfied and still less reflective petty thief? Bill doubted it.

They were past Perth and heading down the long valley towards Gleneagles and Stirling. The country was still green here, with the stubbly residue of crops catching, with a shimmy of light, the occasional burst of sun from between cloud banks. The hills had pushed back still further from the road, and the farmhouses were trimmer, better kept, more on show. The changed landscape dampened the mood in the car; the evocations of domesticity, whipping by in the slipstream, reminded both Bill and Mark of the queer accommodations they had both made with life. Bill felt like a drink.

He could visualise—quite clearly—the slopping level of whisky in the car bottle. He wanted to stop and have a piss and then a decent pull. Tramp down the memories that his cross-examination of Mark was dragging to the surface. But Bill didn't trust Mark at all now. He wouldn't feel safe leaving the car running while he splattered on the verge. He could all too clearly imagine the sound of the door slamming at his back, the car's wheels crunching, spattering gravel. His own anguished cries as he turned, and ran up the road, his cock still spluttering pee as he contemplated loss of car and everything else. And he wasn't even insured for theft. Bill really hated Mark now. Hated him for being pathetic—and a threat; at one and the same time.

A lay-by came by. Bill dabbed the brakes, lazily circled the wheel. The car ground to a halt. Bill yanked up the bottle of Campbelltown from its sleeve of medical journals. He unscrewed it, took a deep pull and passed it to Mark, who looked at him warily, took a slug and passed the bottle back. "You're not bothered by the pigs then?" he asked.

"Of course I am," Bill replied tartly. "Who isn't? But that's the last before Glasgow—I'll not risk going head-to-head with them." He checked the rearview and side mirrors, lazily circled the wheel to the right, then pushed home the accelerator, like the plunger of some 300 cc hypodermic. The big car summoned its inertia and banged back up onto the crown of the road. Bill felt the bladder of mistrust push its toxic cargo

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back against his pelvis. He resigned himself to the sensation. Better score more distraction.

"So, what'll you be doing with this mate in Glasgow then?"

"I dunno, not too much. We certainly won't be drinking single fucking malts—" he grinned at Bill in a way he hoped was rueful, "—more like single fucking pints. He's on the sick—my mate. But I've got a few quid, I promised him a bit of a night. It'll be the same as our normal routine. Do a few cans at home. Down to the pub for a few. Then a carry out; and then the racing—"

"Racing?"

"We-ell, not racing exactly. It's just a thing we do—we've always done—when I'm in Glasgow. My mate—he's got these old Tonka toys y'know?"

"Yeah."

"Not the little ones—the jeeps and that. But the big ones, the ones kids can sit on and push along wi' their feet. Y'know the big earth movers and that?"

"Yeah."

"Once we're right bladdered we get them out. There's one each—an earth mover and a dump truck, but we always have a little scrap over who gets which. The dump truck's faster, but it has a dicky wheel—comes off at speed. Anyway, we get 'em out, like I say, and we go racing down Sauchiehall Street. Y'know Sauchiehall Street?"

"Yeah."

"Aye—well, you'll know it's got a good long slope to it then, just right. Like a sort of ski jump effect y'know. Anyway, it's a right good laugh. All the folk coming out of the pubs cheer us on; and if one of us runs into a feller, there's always a ruck of some sort. Good laugh—great *craic*!"

Mark was clearly gingered up by this, this prospect of a drunken race seated on toys long since outgrown. His eyes were wide—so that Bill could clock all the yellowed rim of them. His grin gaped; his sour-mash breath blanketed the car. Bill lit the last of his prerolled joints and took a big pull of flowery smoke. Mark was still puffed up, but Bill's silence

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about the Tonka toy trials was clearly unnerving him. Eventually Bill spoke. "Tough tough toys for tough tough boys," he said.

"Whassat?"

"You remember—don't you? Or are you too young? It was the advertising slogan for Tonka toys. The telly advert was all set in a sand pit and there would be this drumming—tom-toms I suppose—and the various Tonka toys would come into view—all of them self-propelled. No drivers—of any scale at all. Then the drumming would go to a kind of peak, while one of the Tonka jeeps bounced over the terrain, and a voice would say, Tough Tough Toys for Tough Tough Boys! in *very* stentorian tones—you remember?"

"No, I can't rightly say I do." Mark was downcast. Perhaps, Bill thought, I shouldn't have upstaged his anecdote, or maybe he's embarrassed because he doesn't know what stentorian means. They drove on in silence, passing the joint between them.

They were leaving Dunblane behind on it's promontory of green, when the rain, which up until then had been confining itself to irregular bursts, clamped down in earnest. As Bill pushed the big saloon up onto the M9 motorway, curtains of near-solid precipitation were pulled-to around them. The world disappeared into an aqueous haze. Bill hunkered forward in his seat and concentrated hard on the driving. There was so much water on the road that any sudden braking would result in an aquaplane. And the skunk—which never troubled him in clear weather—seemed to slick his brain, so that an injudicious thought might result in a psychic aquaplane. He tried a few more conversational forays with Mark, a few more insinuating questions, but the hitchhiker had clammed up. He'd shot his wad with the Tonka toys anecdote. Either that, or—and the apprehension of this made Bill peculiarly uneasy—Mark was coming to an awareness of the extent to which he'd been filleted; of how much Bill had managed to get out of him, while rendering nothing of his own in return.

What must it feel like, Bill considered, to have given that

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much of yourself and got so little in return? It was a version of psychic rape. It was a dishonest employment of his own neglected, analytic abilities. It was an abuse of someone who had never agreed to be a patient. It was like trying to get a whore to come. It was an obscenity—a violation. Bill kept silent, piloted the car through its new, turbulent element.

Past Stirling with its folly wavering through the rain. Every time Bill went by he swore that one day he would stop, climb the tower, preferably with a woman. It looked like the tower's summit might be a good place to make love. Or at any rate fuck. The rain was worse now—almost solid. And the traffic was heavier—in every respect. Enormous, articulated lorries pummelled the carriageways. Bill began to bite the insides of his cheeks. By the time they passed Falkirk and joined the A80 for a spell, the conditions were truly dangerous, and the big car was wallowing along at between thirty and forty. "There won't be much racing tonight if this keeps up," Bill said, trying to leaven the atmosphere. But all he got from Mark was a grunt.

Bill couldn't get the Tonka toy racing out of his head. He could picture it only too well: the drunk ragamuffins at the top of the road, their outsize toys clutched between their tattered, bejeaned legs. The knots of men and women spilling on to the pavements from pubs and clubs. And then the bellow to begin. The acrylic wheels skittering and scraping on the paving. The sense of accelerating on nothing as the stabilising legs retract. A biff here, a bash there, and all the time picking up speed. The racers' jerky perspectives disclosing only the onrush of the street . . . How will it all end, if not in tears? Tough tough toys—for tough tough boys.

"I can't drop you right in Glasgow—"

"—Whassat?" Mark had to shout over the drumming of the downpour and the thrumming of bass. Bill killed the CD.

"I can't drop you right in Glasgow, I was going to let you off when I got onto the M73, but—" Bill remembered the confused pack, the cheap plastic poncho "—I couldn't do that in this rain—you'd be soaked." Mark gave him a look

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as if to suggest that this was all that people like Bill ever did to people like him. "What would you say to my dropping you in Motherwell and then you can get the train in from there—it'll only be a few quid . . ."

Mark looked at Bill, his expression heavily freighted with the lack of a few quid more than the very few quid he had; and the eternal recurrence of people's assumption that he might be capable of making good the deficiency. Bill thought of Mark's night out, the cheap drinks scrounged; the dregs drained; a crumb of hash on a pinhead trapped beneath a milk bottle; perhaps solvents or fights towards dawn. Bill ambivalently relished the opportunity to say, "Look, it's no bother to me—a few quid. I'll stump it up . . . and well, who knows, maybe you'll have the chance to pay it back in the future." Bill presented Mark with the grin of an inverted Cheshire cat—it was gone long before Bill was.

"I wouldna' want to impose—" said Mark, with the easy non-assurance of someone who had been doing just that for years.

"—It's no problem—no worry." Bill wanted to go on with this mini litany of reassurance, to say that there would be no *pain*, no *poverty*, no *want* of any kind. That Mark and he would be reunited after the storm had spluttered to a finish. That they would find themselves in a field, verdant with opportunity, burgeoning with cash; and that the two of them would smoke skunk and drink whisky. Make fiscal hay while the sun shone.

But instead Bill said nothing—simply drove; and as the prow of the big car parted the downpouring waves he envisioned Sauchiehall Street, the tough tough toys, their tough tough riders. Surely with this offer of money Mark would ask him something—his *name* even. But no.

They bucketed past the slip road for the M8 and central Glasgow. By the time they reached the Motherwell exit of the M74 the rain hadn't simply thinned—it had gone altogether. The road ahead was mirror-bright once more; the verges painfully green. Even the outcrops of housing in the

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middle distance appeared sluiced into cleanness. See the difference with flashfloods. If only this will hold, thought Bill, knowing full well it wouldn't. He began making those same, implausible calculations of hard driving he had made on the road out of Thurso that morning. It was four thirty now, drop the hitchhiker by five. He might be in the region of Manchester by eight, Birmingham by ten, home by midnight—wherever that was.

They were puttering up the hill into Motherwell, then they were channelled into the switchbacks of the one-way system. The inhabitants of the old steel town had taken the break in the rain as a signal to sally forth. There was a preponderance of wheeled shopping bags and thick overcoats among the precincts. Eventually Bill found the entrance to the station and pulled in. He twisted sideways in his seat, while Mark, galvanised by arrival, yanked open his door, swung out, opened the back door and commenced reassuming his confused backpack. Bill managed to extract a tenner from his tight pocket; a tenner so worn and soft that it felt like the pocket lining. "This should do it," he said to Mark. The hitchhiker looked at the money as if it were no more than his due—a reasonable prophylactic, Bill tacitly agreed, to the shame occasioned by receiving charity.

"Are you sure?"

"No problem, really, no problem at all."

"Well, thanks for that, really, thanks . . ." Mark dried, perhaps conscious of a hole in his gratitude; a hole where a name should have been inserted—but it was too late for that now. ". . . I dunno—maybe some time—"

". . . Whenever, really—whenever." Bill did his negative Cheshire act again.

"And thanks for the lift, and the smoke . . . and the dram—"

"—Really, no problem, good to have company. I wish you luck with all of your endeavours. A bright young man like you—you'll come through." Sounding portentous no longer seemed to matter. It was better to pull out this Capraesque

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bullshit, rather than allow Mark to wallow in the gathering realisation that he was an unthinking, unfeeling drone. That he could take a lift from a man, smoke his dope, eat his food, drink his whisky and then take his money, all without even asking him his name.

The hitchhiker stood, one foot on a newly lain kerb, the other on the wet asphalt of the roadway. His pack was back on his back, his poncho caught the wind and billowed; the spinnaker for a solo yacht on a round-the-life race. Bill leaned across and addressed him through the lowered passenger-door window. "And as for the dosh—don't worry about it. I hope there's a couple of quid left over—you'll need some oil for the racing tonight—" Bill heard Mark try and cut across this final imprecation, but the big car was already rolling, and the blunt hand was already circling, and the bloodshot eyes were already checking, and the bored ears were already adjusting to the thrum of bass.

In the rearview mirror Bill saw Mark jerk the pack into a more comfortable position and head towards the station entrance. It wasn't until he was back on the M74 and rolling south, at speed, that Bill considered what it might have been that the hitchhiker was trying to say.

Food, who needed it? It just made you shit more on these sedentary migrations. Best not to bother. Best not to think about rest either. Those signs that whip by in the already hazy periphery of vision: T . . . A . . . K . . . E . . . A . . . B . . . R . . . E . . . A . . . K . . . T . . . I . . . R . . . E . . . D . . . N . . . E . . . S . . . S . . . K . . . I . . . L . . . L . . . S. And what would rest be like anyway? Bill had tried that option, sagged across the wheel like a human air bag, in some forlorn service station car park. Or Welcomed Inn to seven hours of thrashing in thin duvets, then tea making in the chilly dawn, rearranging individual plastic cups of UHT milk on a little ledge, before putting on his pants, his jacket, driving again.

No, stopping was out of the question—there had already been an unscheduled halt at Mrs McRae's. But that was only

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to be expected . . . by the time the Ola got into Scrabster it had already been eleven . . . and there was no point in pushing on with that savage headache . . . or that savage tremor. Did he perhaps have a savage tremor now? Bill held one hand free of the steering wheel and watched its level, relative to the horizon of the windscreen itself, which, as he honed in on it, gulped up a hundred metres of road and a chunk of hillside. No, no tremor in particular. Bill groped for a couple more Pro-Plus pills in his jacket pocket. He lit another cigarette. He boosted his speed, overtaking a lorry, undertaking a panel van in the fast lane, cranking the big car up to ninety-five as he hovered back to within sideswiping distance of the central barrier. Strip-the-steel-willow!

Bill liked this section of the drive. To have slipped away from Glasgow so surely, and now to bucket down Clydesdale with the last of the afternoon sun bouncing over his shoulder, and the hills of the Ettrick Forest opening up to the south-west. It was also an entrance to another hinterland—the Borders—and suitable that night should meet day here as well.

But Christ! Bill was tired. And ever since he'd dropped the hitchhiker in Motherwell, dropped him back into his own particular sink of anonymity, he had felt troubled. It was a mistake to have picked up the hitchhiker. *He* certainly hadn't appreciated the gesture. No, not a gesture—actually an *altruistic act*. Or was it that the hitchhiker had got his measure all too well? He wasn't that stupid. He had been genuinely affronted by the inquisition, resolved to give nothing real at all—spun Bill a line. "Genuinely affronted!" What an asinine expression. Bill laughed at the asininity and then tried to surf a little more on his own hilarity. He tried to imagine that he was high—and lighthearted. It didn't work.

Darkness was welling up from the road; to the west it flowed from the valleys. Bill switched the lights back on to full beam. I'll be cosy in my little light tunnel, he joked. He had stopped at Mrs McRae's because he was sick with drink. He had more or less gone up to Orkney this time because he was sick with drink. He didn't like doing locums—he couldn't

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hold any other kind of job down. Not anymore. He knew what genuinely affronted him—Bill did. What genuinely affronted him was the vigour of his fingernails. They kept on growing despite everything. Even now, the pallid fingers wrapped around the steering wheel each had their own dear little crescent of new life—and new dirt. Only something as dumb as a fingernail could go on growing in this hellish environment. Take skin for example. Take the skin on Bill's ankles—Bill had. Bill had picked and plucked and even strummed the ulcerating skin on his ankles, and it had rewarded him by generously suppurating. That was skin for you—very intelligent stuff. Didn't go on growing after death, like hair or nails.

The hitchhiker had had this information encoded in his own lousy, drink-raddled body. In that they were alike—in that and perhaps a lot else as well. Bill thought of how workable, how trustworthy, his denial of his own drink problem usually was. It was like a handy, moveable bulwark that he could position in front of any one of the dark corridors leading away from his self-awareness. The hitchhiker—Bill shouldn't have picked him up. He'd broken the rhythm of the journey; he'd made Bill late. He'd fucked with the bulwarks. Ha! Late for his own funeral. No—his own *cremation*. In Hoop Lane, opposite the Express Dairy. When Bill was young he thought that everyone had died here, that everyone was burnt here—at Golders Green Crematorium—their essence disappearing in the form of charcoal smoke issuing from a red brick tower into a grey sky. Now Bill knew he had been right.

And now, in the gathering gloom, Bill felt all pushed out of shape. His method of dealing with himself depended on carefully negotiated transitions from being alone to being among others. Hence Mrs McRae—who didn't, of course, count. Hence also Anthony Bohm, who was no threat to anyone; least of all—with his swollen liver more or less *propped* on the bar—to Bill, or any other physic-fond physician for that matter.

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The encounter with the hitchhiker had pushed Bill all out of shape. He had mentally castigated the hitchhiker for his abusive relationships—but what constituted such an abuse? He knew what constituted such an abuse. The 3 A.M. rows that cranked up and then cranked down and then cranked up again; the siren song of emotional fracture. He knew all about them, just as he had full cognisance of the serial, parallel monogamist's lifestyle. No, no socialese, call a fucking spade a spade. He fucked around—like a spade. Grasped his haft and planted it where he would. At the Felliniesque conversion of Dunrobin Castle it wouldn't simply be a case of wassailing whores causing trouble—the whole emotional utopia, the whole fantasy of inclusion was just that—a fantasy.

Bill's life was now—and he realised this groping in the dark for the car bottle, as the big saloon whipped through the roundabout and on to the A74—based, established on exclusion. Every hysterical evasion, every late night session rubbing up the whisky bottle, until Mr Blubby, the drunken genie emerged—it was all coming back to him. He took a slug, and in his hurry to get the bottle up and down without leaving go of the wheel, managed to slop several measures on to his chest. He was tired—and yes, perhaps it would be worth admitting it to himself—just a little drunk.

No time to consider that now. Heads down, no nonsense, mindless boogie. Hone in on the music—ignore the background screech of the Furies, who pursued him: "Bill! Bill! Why did you do it/say it/go there/lie/come back/treat me like this!" He cranked up the CD. He crunched another caffeine lozenge, hoping the bitterness alone might make him alert. It wasn't working. The road was doubly blurred. He rubbed one ulcerated shin against the other. He bit the inside of his cheek. He pinched the fat on the inside of his thighs with his unabashed fingernails. Eventually he took to slapping himself. Big, openhanded clouts. First one with the left, then one with the right. Left to left and right to right. Each blow gave him a few seconds of clarity, another hundred metres of onrushing progress.

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And as the big car bisected the night, drumming past Locherbie, ignoring the blue signs that blazoned Carlyle's Birthplace and eventually gaining the M6—which was lit for its first few miles, a tarmac chute—Bill gutted the carcass of his own life. He pulled out the entrails of neglect, and the gallbladder of resentment; he removed the engorged liver of indulgence and excised the kidneys of cynicism. He fumbled in the cavities of his body for his heart—but couldn't find it.

The big car plunged on. No longer a chimaera, a meld between man and machine, but merely a machine, with a ghost loose in it somewhere. Desperately Bill shuffled his pack of shiny memories, of *al fresco* lovemaking, of dramatic hill scenery, of . . . his son. Who would be what—around five now. Not very clever that. Not clever at all—to have not seen your own child for two years. Three years. It had been three years.

That had been the shabbiest of the accusations he had lain against the hitchhiker—the one of neglect. Bill knew all about neglect. He knew all about unanswered phone calls, crumpled up letters, torn postcards. People said they didn't want children because they didn't want the responsibility. But if you didn't take responsibility for them—how could you have it for yourself?

About forty minutes later, at Shap in the Lake District, at the point where the M6 really did begin to feel as if it were plunging inexorably downhill, down to the south, down to London, the ghost that was piloting the machine took a long, final look in the rearview mirror, before lazily circling the steering wheel to the left and turning into an inexistent lay-by.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

A.S. Byatt's novels include *Angels and Insects, The Game, Shadow of a Sun, Still Life, The Virgin in the Garden* and *Possession*, which was awarded the 1990 Booker Prize. She received the 1995 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction for the title story of her collection *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye.*

Giles Foden is on the staff of the *Guardian*, having been an assistant editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. The story in this issue is excerpted from his first novel, *The Last King of Scotland*. Born in Warwickshire, he grew up in Africa.

Claire Keegan was raised on a farm in Wexford, Ireland. She has received several awards for her work, including the William Trevor Prize and the Francis McManus Award.

Will Self's works include *Cock & Bull, Grey Area, My Idea of Fun, The Quantity Theory of Insanity* and, most recently, *Great Apes*. He has won both the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize.

FEATURE

Alain de Botton is the author, most recently, of *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *On Love*. He lives in London.

POETRY

Simon Armitage's poetry collections include *Loom!, Kid* and *The Dead Sea Poems*, all of which were shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award. His latest collection is *CloudCuckooLand*.

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Lavinia Greenlaw is the author of two poetry collections, *Night Photography* and *The World Where News Travelled Slowly*, the title poem of which won the 1997 Forward Prize.
Tim Kendall, editor of *Thumbscrew*, received an Eric Gregory Award for UK poets under thirty last year. His poems have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books*, *London Magazine* and the *PN Review*. Born in Plymouth, he is now a lecturer at the University of Bristol.
Andrew Motion is the author of several volumes of poetry, including *Natural Causes*, for which he received the Dylan Thomas Award; *Dangerous Play*, for which he received the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize; and, most recently, *Salt Water*, as well as three biographies, *Keats*, *The Lamberts* and *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. He is a professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia.
Graham Nelson teaches pure mathematics at St. Anne's College, Oxford, and edits *Oxford Poetry*. In 1997 he received an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors.
Robin Robertson's first book of poems, *A Painted Field*, won the 1997 Forward Prize and the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award. He was brought up on the northeast coast of Scotland and lives in London.
Neil Rollinson's first collection of poems, *A Spillage of Mercury*, was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation in 1996. He won first prize in the 1998 National Poetry Competition. He was born in Yorkshire, England.

INTERVIEW

Francesca Riviere (Martin Amis interview) is currently doing research for a film entitled *The Last Days of Marilyn Monroe*. Her articles and interviews have appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Premiere* and *Smoke*. She lives in California.

ART

Lucian Freud's work appears courtesy of the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York City.
Malcolm Morley is represented by the Michael Klein Gallery in New York City. **Anthony Haden-Guest** is the author of *The Last Party: Studio 54 and the Culture of the Night* as well as *True Colors: the Real Life of the Art World*.
Marc Quinn is represented by the Gagosian Gallery in New York City.
Kerry Stewart is represented by the Max Protech Gallery in New York City.

ERRATUM: Our interview with Barney Rosset (issue 145) featured a photograph of Rosset and Samuel Beckett that should have been credited to Bob Adelman. Our apologies.

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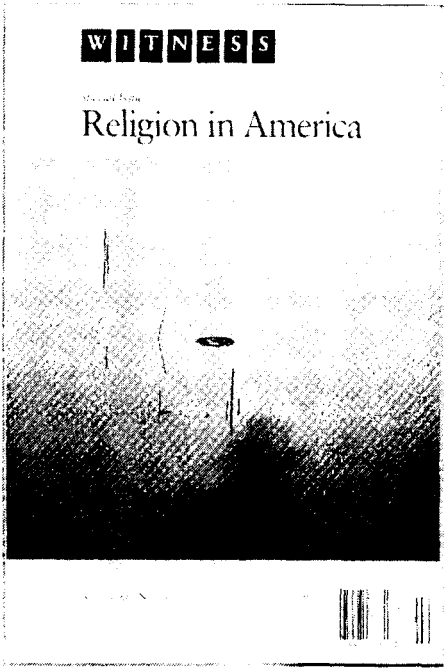

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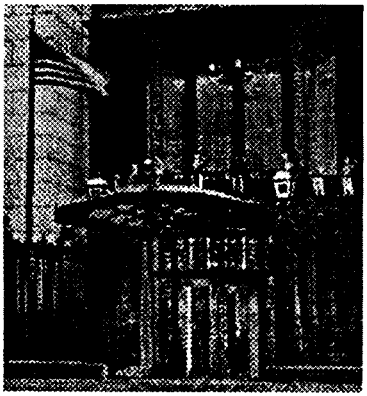

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